

Community and Social Life: Ritmo del Barrio

“My mother and I, we came from El Paso, Texas ... that first year it was a bit difficult to get used to the difference of living here [in the United States, in Oakland]. El Paso, Texas was like it was in Mexico. It is another Mexico, stores and everything in Spanish. And we got here and there was nothing like that. Not even corn tortillas ... just those [made] of wheat flour and bread.”

*—Dominguita Velasco (born in Mexico in 1901;
arrived in Oakland in 1922)*

The social and cultural life of the Latino community of Oakland in the last century is a story of resilient cultural traditions. However, change and accommodation to American styles of cultural expression, from music and dance to food and ceremonial holidays also play a part in the tale. At first, adapting to American life was not easy. As Dominguita Velasco put it so evocatively: “My mother suffered because she was accustomed to corn tortillas, not those made of flour. There were none here, not even Mexican restaurants, nor stores, nothing like that.” The lack of corn tortillas symbolized the neglected presence of Mexicans in Oakland at the time. But Dominguita Velasco persevered, as she and other Mexicans began to build upon their knowledge of their cultural past to forge a sense of identity in the midst of living in this country. For Velasco, a school pageant on American ethnic groups provided an opportunity to assert her cultural heritage:

“At that time, each ethnic group at the end of the year made a presentation [about their culture] ... there were few Mexicans,



Dominguita Velasco (second row left) with her mother, sister, niece and daughter Rosita (front right) in front of Dominguita's restaurant Enchilada Shop, Oakland, 1955. Collection of Oakland Museum, gift of Dominguita Velasco.

but then we started thinking that we Mexicans could not be left behind ... So that was when I started to promote the idea that we should present something, a traditional Mexican dance, and we started asking around, who played the guitar? Who could sing? And so we presented a number and we were not left out [of the pageant].”

After Dominguita Velasco organized a group that performed a traditional song and dance, there was no going back to cultural silence. That same pride was evident in the community’s early development, centered on 7th Street in downtown Oakland, where the fledgling *barrio* (neighborhood) emerged and later blossomed into a bustling hub for the expanding Latino neighborhood, composed primarily of Mexican immigrants. Though very young at the time, Natividad Ramos remembered that “all along 7th Street there were all kinds of little businesses, family run” to serve the *colonia* (neighborhood) of Oakland. As the community grew and matured, it celebrated public expression of its cultural roots, as musical groups appeared, Spanish language forms of entertainment multiplied, and traditional holidays were observed. The Star Theater began to exhibit motion pictures made in Mexico and subsequently became simply known as the *Estrella* Theater. Ramon Martinez successfully convinced English language radio stations, such as KRE in Oakland, to introduce their first Spanish language programs in which Mexican music was usually featured. In this vein, Guadalupe Carlos initiated Sunday afternoon cultural events called *tardeadas*, to which he brought Mexican singing and musical artists that attracted throngs of Mexican families from around the East Bay. Indeed, Dominguita Velasco still recalls the visit of Mexican superstar Pedro Infante to her restaurant, while his tour stopped in Oakland for a performance — he evidently loved her *chilaquiles* (a tortilla based Mexican dish).

Attitudes among first-generation immigrants changed slowly. For instance, Frances Granados recalled “at home when my grandmother was living, we were supposed to learn Spanish first before we ever spoke any English. So she wouldn’t let us speak any English at all. We had to learn our language first and then when I went to school, that’s when I learned to how to speak English.” Parents also tried to maintain traditional forms of courtship; at times young Mexican women, for instance, had to negotiate parental dictates with their desire to “go out” to popular dance spots. Carolina (Lopez) Cruz remembered that



Sponsored by *Mi Rancho* tortilla factory, this float was in the parade commemorating the closure of Treasure Island. The elaborate traditional costumes of the participants reflect the resilient cultural pride of Oakland’s Mexican community, Oakland, 1942. Collection of Dominguita Velasco.

during her courtship with José Cruz, “my father would not let us go [to Sweet’s Ballroom] by ourselves, my mother had to go with us. My parents were very strict,” she went on to say, which forced them “to talk to each other on the sly at first.” In this sense, parents and grandparents frequently invoked traditional notions of *respeto* (respect) and social behavior — respect for elders, for religious practices, for familial duties, and for parental authority.

Yet, if there was a continuing pride in Mexico’s heritage among Mexicans in Oakland, American cultural influences also had a draw that deepened as the 1920s gave way to the Depression years. By the eve of World War II, the Mexican community, especially its youth, increasingly enjoyed a variety of cultural forms. This mix reflected the retention of Mexican cultural elements, but it also incorporated new forms into the cultural repertoire of growing numbers of Latinos, particularly its youthful population. In this sense, the float sponsored by *Mi Rancho* tortillas in 1942 captured the maintenance of a strong sense of pride in Mexican culture, but it also suggested the growing accommodation of American influences, as noted in the use of the American flag. Although Mexicans of all ages continued to pack Guadalupe Carlos’ *tardeadas* and to fill the seats at the *Estrella* Theater, they were also buying tickets to see American movies, listening to American music on their radios, and using English with increasing frequency. In many respects, the World War II era crystallized the underlying Americanization among Latinos, where young people in particular mixed the cultural inheritance of parents and grandparents with that of modern American popular culture. On the surface, the dances at Sweet’s Ballroom were diverting and entertaining, but they also brought together the two distinct cultures: traditional ballads of romance (*boleros*) were played along with the latest American tunes. Eduardo Carrasco remembers taking his future wife, Katy Cruz, to the dance emporium. “We went to Sweet’s Ballroom on



A poster advertising a *tardeada* at Sweet’s Ballroom. *Tardeadas* (afternoon entertainment events) at Sweet’s Ballroom were popular with East Bay Latinos from the 1940s to the 1950s, Oakland circa 1945. Artist, Guadalupe Carlos. Collection of Oakland Museum of California, gift of Charles H. Carlos.

14th ... where everybody went dancing ... where all the swing dancing [took place]. You could wear your zoot suit there. And there we saw all the big stars ... like Charlie Barnett, Artie Shaw, Xavier Cugat.” The dress of young Mexican women at Sweet’s indicated their adjustment to American life: they sported open-

toed shoes, pompadour hairstyles, and fashionable skirts. The war years intensified this mix. African Americans and their music, for example, intermingled with the spread of “Latin” music, and both forms inspired American musicians toward novel arrangements that attracted diverse audiences and large crowds to popular dance places, none more emblematic than Sweet’s Ballroom. On the sumptuous dance floor of Sweet’s on Saturday nights, Mexican newcomers sought partners among young women fresh from California’s rural valley towns who worked at wartime plants. As one woman recalls, the ballroom “was loaded with them.” Meanwhile, soldiers from Texas, New Mexico and elsewhere likely waited for the opportunity to take a partner out for a “hot” musical number and sailors probably looked for a woman to hold as the last slow dance drew to a close. As photos and posters from that era show, whatever the popularity of Tommy Dorsey or Glenn Miller, the music of Latin America, especially that of Mexico, continued its hold on the Latino community, regardless of age. Eduardo Carrasco may have danced to the music of Artie Shaw, but when he romanced his wife, he sang Mexican boleros to her, such as “*Bésame Mucho*” and “*Muñequita Linda*.” Still, there was no denying that fundamental changes were in the offing. A poster announcing the performance of a mariachi feminil (an all-female traditional Mexican musical group) at a *tardeada* at Sweet’s demonstrates how American notions filtered in with traditional Mexican forms of cultural expression.

On the other hand, the war also brought a new influx of Mexican immigrants, many of them drawn to the area through the *bracero* (literally, a man with strong arms) program, as California received more *braceros* than any other state. Through this accord between Mexico and the United States government, millions of Mexican workers came to this country, including Alameda County, to relieve the labor shortages generated by World War II. Many of them came back to the East Bay after the



José Cruz (on stage left playing congos) performs with the Salvador Guerrero Orchestra at Sweet’s Ballroom, circa 1945. Collection of Oakland Museum, gift of José Cruz.

war in search of work, often outside of official regulations. They also rekindled Mexican traditions, reinforcing and renewing the cultural heritage of a previous generation of immigrants. José Cruz, for example, came to Oakland through the *bracero* program and met his future wife during his stay. After the war, he returned and married, and subsequently settled in Oakland. His love of Mexican music led him to become a member of a singing group, and he later joined an orchestra and played on the stage of Sweet’s Ballroom. While Latino youth born in this country gravitated increasingly to American music by the 1950s, Cruz and more recent immigrants replenished Mexico’s heritage and the influence of traditional culture brought by their counterparts a generation earlier.

The 1960s ushered the emergence of a growing concern for civil rights, and that struggle held important cultural implications. For much of Oakland's Latino community, there was an intrinsic connection between civil rights and identity, for recognition of their cultural background. As the murals on the façade of several buildings in the Fruitvale *barrio* of Oakland demonstrate, a respect for Mexican cultural heritage remained fundamental to a renewed sense of community. In fact, one of the key goals of the Mexican community of Fruitvale was the creation of a Latin American Library that would celebrate the works of Latino writers and artists. It was no easy task at first, according to Rosa Escobar, the founder of the library, who remembers "looking around for material and there wasn't very much material at the time." But her determination and that of others paid off, as the library became an established cultural resource for the Latino community of Fruitvale (it is now named the Cesar Chavez Library, in honor of the famous farm labor leader). The push for civil rights, the call for improved social services, and the demands for a better education for Latinos led inevitably to a cultural renaissance, as the community mobilized its resources toward a public celebration of its heritage. Melinda de la Cruz-Alfaro, daughter of a leading activist of Oakland, Josie de la Cruz-Alfaro, recalled her mother's quest: "she noticed that ... thing of knowing your roots ... because of her, the *Baile Folklórico* (folkloric dance group) started. And it was kind of like bringing back the roots of the values that we have from Mexico." Melinda de la Cruz went on to say, the "*Baile Folklórico* for my mom was something that was very important to introduce to the community [as] part of the culture and the heritage that we have." As a result Oakland activists organized folkloric dance groups, the celebration of traditional practices, such as the Posadas (Christmas) and the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the dead), as well the successful establishment of the aforementioned library featuring Latino works. Not surprisingly, at the ceremony naming a local park for the well-known

Oakland civil rights activist, Josie de la Cruz, a youth dance group performed in her honor. It was fitting tribute for a person whose concern for the rights of Mexicans in Oakland was indistinguishable from her advocacy for the recognition of Mexico's cultural heritage.



The Spanish Speaking Citizens' Foundation building located in the heart of the Fruitvale district, is a monument to the pioneering efforts of community activists that fought for the improvement of the conditions of the Latino community of Fruitvale, Oakland, 2003.

Photograph by Jeremy Harris.

As street scenes of the Fruitvale wonderfully capture, the social and cultural life of the Latino community of the East Bay continues to reflect the mix of the traditional and the modern. The respect for Mexican culture remains and its resilient presence permeates contemporary *barrio* life. Continuing migration from Mexico specifically, and other parts of Latin America more generally, has created a transnational quality to cultural life in the Mexican communities of the area. Only a cursory glance of the busy intersection of Fruitvale Avenue and International Boulevard is necessary to appreciate the vitality of the links between Mexico and *colonias* here in this country: signs announce the ability to send remittances to Mexico, CDs of Mexican artists line the windows of record stores, posters invite people to attend concerts by Mexican musical groups at the Oakland Arena, and everywhere conversations are conducted in Spanish.

Equally important, Latino culture has extended far beyond the confines of the *barrio*. Museums, art galleries, stage shows, musical events, and civic celebrations throughout the region all reflect the impact of Latino culture in the contemporary life of this country. It is a testimony to the perseverance of those who founded the Mexican community of the East Bay, who dared to celebrate their culture despite much public indifference to the heritage of that initial immigrant generation from Mexico. They have become citizens of this country, and there is no doubt of their political loyalties, but their affection for their culture has not changed. Future generations will undoubtedly sustain their patrimony, and American society will be richer for it.

Ray Solis, born in Mexico in 1911, entered this country in 1918 and arrived in the East Bay twenty seven years later, and he is now a citizen of this country. Yet, his love for Mexico remains: “*Nací en México, me creí aquí. Mi obligación es para los Estados Unidos, pero mi corazón está en México.*” (I was born in Mexico; I was reared here. My loyalty is for the United States, but my heart remains in Mexico.)



Street vendors, hot dogs and tamales in Oakland’s Fruitvale district are symbolic of the mixing of cultures that has marked the past and present of Latinos in the East Bay, Oakland, 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.