

Revolution fuels immigration

BY BRENDA L. KIPP

Immigrants from Mexico brought yet another ingredient to Topeka's melting pot in the 1900s, adding to the spiritual mixture of the city.

In 1910, a revolution was taking place in Mexico. About the same time, Santa Fe Railway was looking for cheap labor. As a result, Topeka became home to hundreds of Mexicans in need of jobs and a refuge from the revolution.

"Without the Santa Fe Railroad's need for low cost manpower, the Mexican colony in Topeka would have been non-existent," according to the book "The Melting Pot," by Roy Bird.

Job opportunities for Mexicans also opened up at other businesses, which created a stable Mexican population in the capital city. However, living conditions for the Mexicans were poor. In spite of their poverty, there were those who had the desire to start their own Catholic parish.

Pedro Lopez and the Rev. Epifano O'Campo, who had known each other in Mexico, approached several priests in Topeka about forming a parish. In 1914, Our Lady of Guadalupe was established. Parishioners first met in a small rented store on Branner Street. The church was on the top floor with a school on the ground floor. Members attended Mass there until 1921.

According to a story in the program for 1974 Fiesta Mexicana, the Rev. Stephen Zabala arrived in Topeka in July 1921, a time when there was still much political and social unrest in Mexico. The volatile situation south of the border was felt among Topeka's Mexican population, and a feud broke out between the faithful and those who were anti-clerical.

This situation prompted Zabala to buy a handgun. One night in his room, Zabala was inspecting his gun. The gun misfired, wounding the priest in the abdomen. He died on Nov. 16, 1924.

Between 1924 and 1929, Our Lady of Guadalupe rectory and parish hall were erected. Under the direction of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, the parish began to flourish between 1929 and 1937.

The cornerstone for the church at 134 N.E. Lake was laid on Sept. 14, 1947, and blessed by Bishop George Donnelly. The church building represents the only "true Mexican ethnic architecture in Shawnee County," according to Bird.

The flood of 1951 put 2½ feet of water in the church, and the structure sank. Seven years later, concrete was forced under the floor to raise the church



Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church celebrates the 25th anniversary of the current church building with a Mass featuring a Mexican chorus and a band of parish musicians. The cornerstone for the church at 134 N.E. Lake was laid in September 1947.

back to level position. The walls, floors and foundation cracked as the building settled. Then, the June 8, 1966, tornado destroyed the parish hall. The church, school and rectory suffered only minor damage.

Once again, the parish bounced back. According to the 1974 Fiesta program, Our Lady of Guadalupe "has become a center, a home, a refuge in time of trouble to the thousands of Mexican Americans in the Topeka area."

The Fiesta Mexicana, Our Lady's major fundraiser, has been drawing crowds from all parts of the city and beyond for 70 years.

Mexican Baptists

On March 24, 1924, Dr. Edwin Brown, a missionary to Mexico, came to Topeka with two Bible students from Mexico. Brown was leading the work being done for the American Baptist Convention.

Threats of violence from local Mexican Catholics almost prevented the men from forming a mission, but relations between the two groups eased and a mission was established. The first service was held at

1001 N.E. Seward. The hall had been used for dancing and as a meeting place for various groups, but at the time services started, the building was vacant. Only 14 people attended the first service. Many stayed away due to threats of violence if they attended services or having already been victimized.

The hall had no heat or water; there were few chairs and a table served as a pulpit.

"Two weeks after the first service, the black or the Negro First Baptist Church gave the mission 25 chairs for their use," according to the book, "History of the Mexicans in Topeka" by Jose M. Garcia.

The congregation bought a church building at N.E. 3rd and Hancock in October 1926. The building had been erected in 1884 as the Third Presbyterian Church. It was later occupied by the Germans and served as St. Paul's Evangelical Church. As the Germans migrated to different areas of the city, this area became predominately Mexican.

Organized as a church in March 1928, the Mexican Baptist Church was dedicated in October 1930.

Just as with Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, the flood of '51 hit the Mexican Baptist Church as well. Nine feet of water flooded the basement, but the sanctuary remained dry. The Kansas Baptist Convention assisted in the clean up and repairs.

The church moved to its third location in 1981, another former Presbyterian church at 437 N.E. Twiss. A location on the Washburn University campus became home in 1985, then the congregation moved to 211 S.W. 6th in February 1986. Today, the church's home is at 2531 S.E. Wittenburg Road. Today it is known as the House of the Lord Church.

Services were conducted in Spanish well into the 1980s. English translations were provided to the younger members of the congregation who didn't speak Spanish.

Despite the difficulties the Mexicans faced in the beginning, their faith brought them through, contributing to the strong spiritual life of Topeka.

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