

A Brief History of Hispanic Tempe

About 300 years ago, Spanish settlers began moving north from central Mexico into the region that is now Arizona. In 1752, Spanish soldiers built a fort known as the Presidio of Tubac. In 1775, they moved north and established the Presidio of Tucson. When this area became part of the United States in 1853, the Mexican residents of Tucson and Tubac became United States citizens. These farmers and ranchers were members of the old families that had lived here for generations. Many of their children went on to become the pioneer settlers of Yuma, Florence, and Tempe.

After the Civil War, the U.S. Army established Fort McDowell on the Verde River. John Y.T. Smith was contracted to provide feed for the soldiers' horses. He hired Mexican laborers to cut wild hay on the banks of the Salt River. These workers established a camp near where the town of Tempe would be soon founded. Other Hispanic families from southern Arizona and Sonora joined them and homesteaded farms nearby.

Between 1870 and 1900, about half of the Tempe area was Hispanic. These first settlers lived in several small communities that together were known as Tempe: Hayden's Ferry, San Pablo, the Sotelo Ranch, and West Tempe. Many Hispanic families in the area worked for Charles T. Hayden at Hayden's Ferry. About fifty employees worked at his flour mill, store, warehouses, and blacksmith's shops. These workers lived in several adobe apartments along the river.

William H. Kirkland encouraged the Mexican laborers who had worked on the Kirkland-McKinney Canal to build a community on the southeast side of the Tempe Butte. He donated eighty acres of land for the townsite, and the sale of lots raised money to build an adobe church. To the White community, San Pablo became known as East Tempe or Mexican Town. The buildings of the neighborhood were all Sonoran-style adobe houses with flat roofs. By 1888, several businesses served San Pablo.

The Sotelo Ranch was located at the southeast corner of Rural and University Drive. In the 1870s, Manuela Sotelo divided her family's land among her daughters. Other relatives came from Tucson and settled there. In 1890, the family subdivided part of the ranch as the Sotelo Addition. Most of these lots were sold to family members. Hispanic families also started farms in West Tempe, following the completion of the San Francisco Canal in 1871. Many of these families later lost this land to repay farming debts, however.

Tempe's Hispanic residents held a variety of jobs. In addition to those who worked for Charles Hayden, the largest employer on the south side of the Salt River, some were independent freighters or merchants. A few Hispanic families owned farmland, but many more worked as laborers, building canals and clearing land for farming and ranching.

The Hispanic community provided its own social activities, including music and entertainment. Mexican organizations sponsored dances, concerts, and Cinco de Mayo celebrations each year. Popular orchestras played traditional Mexican music as well as more contemporary jazz and dance tunes. Weekly dances were also held at an outdoor dance platform in the Sotelo Addition.

During the Mexican Revolution of 1910, thousands of Mexican citizens came to seek refuge in the United States. Local farm owners welcomed these newcomers. Between 1910-1930, one-tenth of the population of Mexico came to the United States, and many of those settled in the Salt River Valley.

As more Mexican immigrants came after 1910, tensions arose between the White and Hispanic segments of Tempe. Tempe's Hispanic pioneer families began referring to themselves as Latin-Americans or Spanish Americans to distinguish them from the new immigrants. Yet when the new Tenth Street School opened in 1912, Hispanic children were not admitted. Nor were Hispanic families allowed to swim in the Tempe Beach Swimming Pool when it opened in 1923. The old town of San Pablo became "the barrio," a segregated community.

Tempe's Hispanic residents resisted discrimination, however. They joined mutualistas, like the Alianza Hispano-Americana, which provided life insurance, burials, and a political voice. Residents also joined the La Liga Protectora Latina (Latin Protection League). Some residents were more direct. In 1923, Adolfo "Babe" Romo challenged school segregation in court. A judge ruled that the 10th Street School must admit Hispanic children.

During World War II, many Mexican-Americans from Tempe served in the armed forces. After the war, returning veterans demanded changes in the segregated community they lived in. Their first success was in 1946, when Hispanic families were allowed to swim at the Tempe Beach pool. In 1964, voters elected Gil Montanez to the Tempe City Council.

After the war, enrollment at Arizona State College increased quickly. To build new dormitories, the college started buying all of the land north of University Drive in the mid-1950s. This area had been the largest and oldest of the Tempe barrios. Many displaced families moved to Victory Acres, a new subdivision near the Tempe-Mesa border which opened in 1945. In 1971, the Escalante Center was constructed to provide social and recreational services for the predominantly Hispanic community.

Though most of the barrios are now gone, an organization called Los Amigos de Tempe works to preserve a sense of community among former residents. Many people have moved to different cities or states, but they occasionally come together for a reunion.