

“Argentine, KS: The Evolution of a Mexican-American Community, 1905-1950”, Judith Ann Findher Laird, 1944, Univ of KS, Ph.D., 1975, History modern – Thesis published 1975 – Pg. 1

ARGENTINE, KANSAS: THE EVOLUTION OF A MEXICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY
1905-1940

(NOTE: The book was hard to photograph and pieces are missing. If you desire to view this reference source, it is located at the Wyandotte West Branch of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library.)

Excerpts from pgs. 193-197

The most flagrant example of racial discrimination which occurred in Argentine was the establishment of a segregated Mexican elementary school. From 1907 until 1924 Mexican children attended the local Anglo school, Emerson, or enrolled in parochial schools. With the increase of Mexican population in the barrio in the early 1920s, local school and civic officials sought to prevent the entry of additional Mexican children in the public school system.

The Mexican elementary school in Argentine, named Clara Barton, began operation in 1924 with an enrollment of 150. The school owed its origin to the civic and P.T.A. groups in Argentine and Armourdale who favored segregated schools for Mexicans. The Spanish Club of the Argentine district, composed of Anglo patrons of the Clara Barton School, raised funds for the new building. The one-room stucco building, located in North Argentine at 2500 Cheyenne Avenue, contained grades one through eight. A staff of three saw the school's operation. As the Mexican-American population grew in the late 1920s and early 1930s, two additional rooms were added. A photograph of Clara Barton Schools appears on the next page. (NOTE: The picture is not included with these excerpts but may be viewed at <http://www.kckps.org/disthistory/closedbuildings/clarabarton.html>) Note the “Spanish” style motif. Mexican grade school children attended Clara Barton school until 1951 when flood waters demolished the building. The flood effectively ended segregation of Mexican elementary children in Argentine.

Segregation of Mexican children throughout Kansas City, Kansas became the rule in 1924. Mexican children attended school in basement rooms, special annexes and at separate schools. In Rosedale, Mexican children were not permitted to attend the newly-constructed Major Hudson School, but were assigned, instead, to the former school building, designated the Major Hudson Annex. In this case, the school board _____ to Anglo _____ to sanction Mexican _____ school system. Elsewhere in Kansas City, Mexican children attended school in _____ public and parochial schools. _____ facilities for Mexican children also _____ the state, notable at Ottawa, Chanute, and Wichita, in the same period. Kansas City, Missouri, however, did not segregate its Mexican grade school pupils.

Thus, school board officials, civic groups and P.T.A. organizations implemented a tri-racial school system in Kansas City, Kansas: white, black and Mexican. Blacks ended segregated elementary and high schools after 1905. The “separate but equal” doctrine which supported school segregation did not produce equal facilities and personnel for Mexican students. The Mexican grade schools were clearly inferior to all other schools in the city. When city health department inspectors conducted a survey of the city's schools in 1939 they found that both Clara Barton and Major Hudson School Annex had substandard toilet facilities. The report

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stated that the schools had “toilet facilities of the poorest and worst type.” These consisted of poorly constructed out-door privies which were infested with flies. Not until 1949 did the city install sanitary facilities comparable to those at the city’s other schools.

Although conditions at the school were bad, Mexican children from the Argentine barrio were not permitted to attend school elsewhere, as the superintendent explained to a Mexican Methodist minister in 1938:

Mexicans have no business moving or living away from the Mexican school. We would rather pay their transportation to the Mxican school than let them attend any other school in the city.

Thus, the school administration strongly supported discrimination towards Mexicans. Prejudice and discrimination against Mexicans permeated the school system and discouraged school attendance and achievement of Mexican and Mexican-American children. Few Mexicans attended high school prior to 1940, despite efforts in the late 1920s by Mexican leaders in the barrio to open Argentine High School to Mexican youths. Although at least one Mexican youth gained entry to Argentine High School as a result of that compaign, few Mexican children stayed in school beyond the eighth grade. (NOTE: See the information on Saturnino Alvarado and his fight carried to the Supreme Court and Washing, DC. – fighting for the right of Mexican-American youths to attend Argentine High School. His daughter, Luz, and his son, Jesse, graduated from Argentine High School in 1930 – the first Mexican Americans to do so - <http://www.kckps.org/disthistory/dist-history/bios/arg-salvarado.html>)

In 1939 the number of Mexican children attending school in Kansas City, Kansas, totaled 604. Roughly 1/5 of these children attended parochial schools. Only three children were in grades nine through twelve and all three attended parochial school. No Mexicans were enrolled in junior college.

The long-range impact of school segregation in the barrio is difficult to assess. Clara Barton produced at least two students who later obtained college degrees. Both students graduated in 1925-26, however, and thereby spent no more than two years at the school. Previously, they attended a non-segregated Anglo school in Argentine. Since school records boast of no other upwardly-bound scholars, it can be assumed that segregation did not facilitate educational achievements. The depression in the 1930s also made such advancement more difficult.

Mexicans in Argentine were not totally successful in their efforts to end discriminatory practices against Spanish-speaking people in the twin cities. Perhaps, if the economy had remained sound, the Mexican population might have continued to make progress in this area. The economic depression of the 1930s, however, took its toll in the barrio. Severe economic hardship sapped the strength of the immigrants.

Artentine’s Mexican immigrants were not unaccustomed to hard times, for they had endured the recessions of 1919 and 1921. The 1919 recession primarily affected packing house laborers, but the 1921 crisis left few barrios untouched. In February, 1921, La Prensa (San Antonio) carried a report that 1500 Mexicans were starving in Kansas City. Layoffs in the

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packing, railroad and construction industries thrust the laborers into desperate conditions. Particularly hard hit was the Westside barrio.

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Social barriers remained rigid. Mexicans were not welcome at the local Anglo Catholic Church in Argentine, nor in most Protestant churches. Even mission workers who staffed the Methodist Mexican Mission in North American maintained a social distance from their charges.

Exclusionary social behavior led to school segregation in Argentine and elsewhere in Kansas City, Kansas as the Mexican and Mexican-American population grew in the early 1920s. When it became apparent that the Mexican community in Argentine was becoming a permanent fixture, local Anglo groups helped finance the construction of a segregated Mexican grade school. Elsewhere in Kansas City, Kansas, similar movements occurred, and Mexican children uniformly began attending school in special annexes, basement rooms and segregated classrooms.

Segregated educational facilities discouraged contacts between Spanish-speaking and Anglo children, for the Spanish-surnamed children attended school within the confines of the barrio. Thus, contact with non-Spanish-speaking youths was haphazard, not institutionalized. This situation reinforced the use of Spanish and did not promote educational achievement among the Spanish-speaking population. As late as 1940 Mexican and Mexican-American children remained virtually excluded from the city's high schools. Segregation initiated a vicious cycle. Mexicans could not move outside the barrio even when they desired to do so; and they remained locked within an ever-tightening circle.

Their exclusion from participation in institutions and activities enjoyed by the Angle community encouraged the barrio to turn inward, to seek within itself the benefits and rewards of community life. This inward focus explains the low rate of naturalization among the Mexican population in Argentine. The immigrants justifiably felt no compunction at not becoming citizens of a country which segregated them as an inferior racial group. Moreover, federal authority appeared as coercive and restrictive to Mexican immigrants prior to the “New Deal” days. Never had they experienced government as a positive force working towards their overall betterment. To them government was synonymous with customs officials, police, judges and census takers.

Mexican suspicion of government dissipated somewhat during the New Deal era as the immigrant community came into contact with federal relief programs. Federal assistance reached the barrio in the form of WPA recreational workers at the Methodist Mexican Mission in North Argentine and through improved health and welfare services made available by federally-assisted local and county agencies. Naturalization among Mexican aliens in Argentine and elsewhere in the city increased in the 1940s, partially as a result of the immigrants' changed perception of the US government. They could identify proudly with such a government, particularly because of its “Good Neighbor” policy towards Latin Americans, manifested both in Argentine and abroad.

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The above are excerpts and not intended to provide the total outlook or message of the subject matter in this publication.