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# **Explore**

# **'History of the Mexican Railroad Boxcar Communities in Chicago'**

**Submitted by McHenry County Historical Society**

**Source: Daily Herald**

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In "The History of the Mexican Railroad Boxcar Communities in Chicago & the Midwest," speaker Antonio Delgado will discuss the legacy of Mexican railroad workers recruited to this country at the turn of the last century and into the 1950s. They laid track, maintained the rights-of-way and made repairs for the Chicago & North Western, Elgin, Joliet & Eastern, Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroads in this area, as well as for lines farther west.

"It’s one of the missing pages of American history that involves labor and most important industry in the entire Midwest: Railroads," Delgado said. "It involves family, culture and immigration; all of those things are very American. People came out of it triumphantly, became part of the community and overcame all kinds of obstacles."

A 1912 edition of the Railway Age Gazette notes: "The Mexican is an interesting type of track laborer, and one with whom the average roadmaster or supervisor is unfamiliar. Five years ago his activities in this country were confined to a limited area in the southwest adjacent to El Paso and the Mexican border. Within the past three or four years Mexicans have been in such demand and have come into this country in such numbers that they are now the main source of supply for the roads west and south of Kansas City and are found in large numbers in Missouri, Iowa and Illinois."

The number of these railroad track workers, or "traqueros," ballooned following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law implemented to prevent a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States.

"The Mexican possesses a number of characteristics which tend to make him a good track man, comparing him with other track men as we find them today," wrote the Railway Age Gazette. "He often prefers section work to extra gang work, because he wishes to bring his family with him … He is peaceable and quiet about the camp and causes little complaint from neighboring residents.

"The Mexican is very loyal to the foreman who commands his respect. This was shown by the way the Mexican gangs worked during the unusually severe snow blockades on the Santa Fe and other western lines last winter. Although unaccustomed to cold and snow, they labored more faithfully than many native gangs in opening the lines, frequently remaining on duty more than 24 consecutive hours in extremely severe weather."

The demand for cheap, productive labor accelerated the need for housing. Boxcars filled the bill -- replacing tent camps -- with mobile homes that could be moved by rail and put on a siding for weeks or months until it was time to relocate.

"Boxcars were never designed for human habitation," Delgado said. Simple holes were cut for windows. Wood stoves provided heat. But as family members joined workers and foremen got to know them, Mexicans began to add porches, gardens and other more personalized touches including places of worship.

"It's a work in progress," Delgado said of his seven-year journey to learn more about this multigenerational piece of our past. "My job is to put it in accurate, historical context."

Immigrant railroad workers and their families lived on railroad property, often less than 20 feet from the tracks -- a very dangerous proposition according Jeffrey Marcos Garcílazo, author of "Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States, 1870-1930."

"The centrality of the boxcar community to Mexican immigrant life in the United States is due largely to its proximity to the railroad yards. But the convenience of proximity and free rent took a terrible toll on the inhabitants," Garcílazo wrote. "Accidents were a common occurrence."

But despite the danger of being run over or struck by trains, the boxcar communities thrived. One was located on the south side of Galesburg, another in West Chicago and yet another near Aurora that boasted 1,000 people by the late 1920s. Mexican workers recycled parts from railroad cars and engines at a CB&Q plant in Eola until the facility closed in 1934.

At that point, many of the Mexican inhabitants dissembled the cars and used the lumber to build permanent homes in the area.

Delgado earned a doctorate in urban planning and public policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago, as well as a master's degree in history from the University of Texas in Austin. He has been a Smithsonian Visiting Scholar and a guest speaker at numerous universities around the country.

The program not only underscores the important contributions these laborers made to the area -- with the use of photos, maps, political cartoons and other period images -- but it also reviews anti-immigrant practices and failed attempts by railroads to use Mexicans as strikebreakers. In 1918, for example, the Chicago & Alton Railroad raised wages for employees from 21 cents an hour to between 30 and 37 cents after would-be replacements learned the true nature of the dispute and refused to work.

"The Mexicans who came during that time had experience from the steel mills on the south side of Chicago," Delgado said. "They had a strong heritage of being involved in union organizing."

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**When answering these questions, make sure to write in complete sentences & provide evidence!**

1. Annotate the article (Underline, Circle vocab, Symbols, etc.)
2. What makes the Railroad industry so “American”?
3. What does the Railway Age Gazette say about Mexican people in 1912 and do we still see that some attitude towards Mexican people today? What has changed?
4. What could be a cause for the influx of Mexican immigrants in the early 20th century?
5. How would you describe a boxcar home? How did these families make them work?
6. Would you consider life in the boxcar communities to be dangerous? If so, why?
7. How important would you consider these Mexican workers? Explain your answer.