

Profile of the Spanish-speaking Community in Yancey County

Rachel Weir 3-2021

History

Until 1995 there were few immigrants from Latin American countries in Yancey County. During the summer of 1995 a wave of immigrants, mostly from the Meseta P'urhépecha, became noticeable. The people of these highlands in the state of Michoacán are descendants of the P'urhépecha, who live near Paricutín, the newest active volcano in North America and the wintering grounds of the Monarch butterfly. The P'urhépecha are a bit of a linguistic enigma. Their language is not related to either that of the Aztecs nor the Maya. The P'urhépecha stand out as a people who were never conquered by the Aztecs or the Mayans.

In 1521 Spain subjugated the P'urhépecha, sent the men to work in the mines, and the diseases the Spaniards brought reduced the population. In the first half of the 16th century Bishop Vasco Quiroga set up craft schools. Crafts still dominate in the area. <https://mexicounexplained.com/vasco-de-quiroga-bishop-utopia/>. The town of Cherán produces solid wood furniture and embroidered items. Paracho is famous for its guitars.

Like the Monarch butterflies, people from Michoacán have made the long journey from middle Mexico to the U.S. and back in support of their families. During the 1980s immigrants came as migrant labor, ending their season with work in the apple orchards of Hendersonville and Christmas tree farms in Avery County. When work closed down for the winter, workers went home to Mexico, to return again in March.

This pattern was interrupted when border security became a political focal point after the 1994 NAFTA treaty created an increase in immigration. Fences were built and security increased along the most heavily trafficked (and safest) areas for crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Attempts to enter the U.S. became more costly, both financially and in human lives. <https://www.worldstir.com/history-u-s-mexico-border-wall/>. Patterns of migration changed. Since workers could no longer migrate so easily to spend time with their families, they brought their families to the U.S. to be with them. The plan was to be in the U.S. long enough to save up enough money to build a house in Mexico and then return there.

Most of the immigrants to Yancey County in the late 1990s were in their early 20s. At first people tended to work in agriculture, landscaping and galax harvesting. Then some of the labor force moved into factory jobs, ironically again producing furniture and doing piece work (blue jeans) until the factories closed. Construction, nursery and tree work were and continue to be common jobs.

Community

Socially, families were very isolated at first. Immigration ripped their social fabric almost to the breaking point. This was a distinct change from life in Mexico, where family and church relationships governed life. Here people did not have that structure and were distrustful of folks who were not from their family and town.

Over time the social fabric has been repaired. Relationships have been built as children were born and godparents named; people have married; Spanish-speaking congregations have formed. Those young families of the first immigrants now include grandchildren. However, there are still weak spots in the fabric. Although families maintain communication with relatives in Mexico by phone, there are people in their 40s who have not seen their loved ones in Mexico since they left. Some had loved ones pass away and were afraid to return to Mexico for the funeral.

Legality

Another weak spot is uncertainty. With deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) always a possibility, it is difficult to make long term plans, to invest in a business or a home. The threat of ICE is a monster that occasionally raises its head--sometimes because of rumors, sometimes through actual raids.

One significant event was the expansion of ICE in NC in the early 2000s. During this time ICE began to sign "287g" agreements with local sheriffs in strategic counties, forming hubs to process detained immigrants. The hub for Western North Carolina is Hendersonville. ICE then pushed for all other NC counties to sign Secure Community agreements, which it accomplished by 2011.

<https://www.ncleg.gov/DocumentSites/Committees/HSCSRIP/12-7-2011%20Meeting/12-7-2011%20Sheriffs%20Presentation.pdf>. In the summer of 2020 the Yancey County sheriff signed a 287g Memorandum of Understanding with ICE. <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/287gMOA/287gWSO-YanceyNc2020-07-20.pdf>. Despite the risks, people have invested in their lives here, buying homes and starting businesses.

Besides the obvious difficulties of working without documentation, one of biggest challenges that has affected the community came in response to September 11, 2001. The REAL ID Act of 2005 ordered states to enact stricter requirements for obtaining state IDs, which includes driver's licenses. States that did not comply would lose federal funding for the Department of Transportation. The end result was that people without a social security number could not renew their driver's license starting in 2008 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/REAL_ID_Act. And by 2016 the last people without documentation no longer had the privilege of driving in NC. So, fear of the police was now added to fear of ICE. (This is not to say that there was not fear of the police before.)

Education

Education in Yancey County has evolved in its response to the influx of immigrant students. Across the state, Spanish teachers were redirected to teach English Language Learner (ELL) classes. (The school system now offers both Spanish language and ELL programs.) Parents struggled to overcome the barriers of language and limited education to help children with their homework. There is now an after-school program (MAGIC) that includes homework help as part of its program. Family expectations have evolved from 15-year-old boys dropping out of school to work and pay their share of the rent to more and more graduating from high school.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) helps give students a reason to stay in school. DACA gives a certain group of immigrants a path towards a work permit. <https://undocumented.ucdavis.edu/legislation/daca/history>. The possibility of working legally increases the value of a high school diploma and opens the door to college as a financial possibility.

And so, we wait for the next chapter of the story. Our Spanish-speaking neighbors now comprise 5 - 10% of the Yancey County population. Will Congress pass immigration reform with a path to citizenship? Will NC join other states in making its regular driver's license (as opposed to a Real ID driver's license) available without requiring a social security number? How will the different communities become blended in fifty years?

Recommended Reading: *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Soccer Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America*, by Paul Cuadros.