

**The Construction of Ethnic Identity
Among Mexican-Americans in St. Paul,
Minnesota in the Post-WWII Era**

*by JoAnna Villone
Macalester College*

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Author Notes

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The Construction of Ethnic Identity Among Mexican-Americans in St. Paul, Minnesota in the Post-WWII Era

Introduction

This paper seeks to look at the complex processes and discourses in the construction of identity among Mexican-Americans in St. Paul, Minn., during the post-war period of 1945-1960. The Cold War era was chosen as a pivotal period in the history of this community because of the ways in which cultural trends of conformity, consumerism, and progress shaped the formation of ethnic identity.

It is the assertion of this paper that the construction of ethnicity within a group arises out of a complex interaction between external and internal influences. Thus, ethnic identity is a result of the tension between social and political contexts, arising from the desire of the group to maintain cultural traditions within a society that requires a certain degree of conformity from immigrants. Within the context of contemporary ideas about cultural pluralism, Mexican-Americans in St. Paul were significantly affected by the pressure to conform to post-war Minnesota society. However, members of the community did not desire a complete surrender of important cultural traditions and values and so constantly sought to define their distinctiveness. The formation of ethnic identity was, therefore, a process of interaction between the White communities' definition of the Mexican-American community and its own constructions of ethnicity. The category called Mexican-American and the definitions of its difference from other racially coded constructions therefore may not be assumed and essentialized, but historicized in time, place, and process.

Joan Scott's path-breaking essay entitled "Experience" has implicit implications for this analysis of the formation of ethnic identity. Scott claims that, in an attempt to correct the imbalances of conventional history and to broaden the perspective of the discipline, historians of difference have related the stories of a multitude of communities and groups. While this strategy has produced a substantial body of work that challenges the dominance of the traditional players in history, it has not always significantly altered the manner in which history is approached. By utilizing the same techniques as traditional historical analysis, these studies often assume, rather than interrogate, categories of difference.

Scott challenges the technique of applying traditional methods to non-traditional history, claiming that it reproduces a fundamentalist approach in its unequivocal acceptance of the authority of experience. She argues that by basing their historical analysis on the legitimacy of personal experience, historians naturalize the difference that they intend to challenge with their work. In other words, by failing to analyze what forces converge to form a particular "experience," the historian takes for granted the identity of the subject, thereby reinforcing the distinction and otherization that the inclusive history sought to correct.

In order to avoid this trap, Scott urges historians to ask questions about how experience is constructed through subject position, voice, perspective, and discourse.¹ She argues that by asking these questions, we can historicize experience,

Not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced and which processes themselves are unremarked, indeed achieve their effect because they aren't noticed.²

Thus the analysis of the processes involved in identity building becomes the object of the study rather than an explanation of experience based on a shared identity. This type of analysis, upon which this paper is based, requires the historian to view identities not as an inevitable expression of a predetermined desire or essence, but rather as a discursive event that is placed within a particular historical moment.

In order to view the discursive processes in closer detail, this paper will investigate the rise of the Mexican Independence Day Celebration and its meanings in both White and Mexican-American populations. The annual celebration of the Mexican War of Independence from Spain grew from a small, internal celebration in the early

1940's to a large patriotic extravaganza which was used as a way to express ethnicity and identity within the confines of cold war Minnesota. It was within this celebration that discourses surrounding the White communities constructions of what was "Mexican" interacted with the concepts of ethnicity asserted by Mexican-Americans.

As background, the first section of this paper will focus on the history of Mexican-Americans in West St. Paul, or the internal situation from 1945-1960. This section describes two organizations which were prominent during the period. *Sociedad Mutua Benéfica Recreativa Anahuac* was a mutual aid society that sought to meet the immediate needs of its first generation immigrant members. An organization of second generation Mexican-American veterans, the American G.I. Forum, was the local chapter of a national group that worked to promote civil rights for Mexican-Americans. Documents and brochures from these organizations are used to analyze the ways in which they presented themselves to both internal and external audiences. These presentations intersected with the historically contingent discourses of the Cold War.

The second section centers around the external situation, analyzing the ideas of *cultural pluralism* within Cold War Minnesota as contained in the Governor's Interracial Commission's report on *The Mexican in Minnesota*. This section places this series of reports within the context of assimilation discourses advocated by Milton Gordon, a Cold War era assimilationist scholar.

The final section will use the annual Mexican Independence Day celebrations as a case study through which the intersection of internal and external discourses about ethnicity may be examined. It is based on 15 years of coverage from the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* and past and present interviews with participants in the celebrations. This section will analyze how the mainstream press highlighted the beauty pageant component of these celebrations in order to convey a gendered and acceptable construction of Mexican-Americans to its White audience. It will also analyze the pageant's functions in creating a Mexican-American "community."

Background on Mexican-Americans in West St. Paul

A Mexican colony was established in the Lower West Side of St. Paul between 1912 and 1916 by Mexicans drawn to Minnesota by sugar beet field work in the northern part of the state. Although originally Mexican workers

only remained in Minnesota for the length of a growing season, they gradually began to settle in St. Paul during the winter months. The colony was centered in the flats, the traditional immigrant neighborhood which had been previously inhabited by eastern European Jews. The neighborhood contained the worst housing stock in the city, and was subject to frequent flooding from the Mississippi River. In St. Paul, Mexicans worked predominantly for the railroad and meat packing factories, although many returned to agricultural work in the summer months.

As the Mexican population grew in size and visibility, other communities expressed concerns about the groups failure to assimilate.³ According to José Trejo,

*Efforts were initiated by the majority society through schools and other institutions such as mainstream churches to 'Americanize' these people. Individuals were criticized for attempting to maintain their language and culture, and children were verbally and physically punished by their teachers for speaking Spanish in the classroom. Maintaining Mexican culture and traditions under these repressive circumstances became very difficult.*⁴

In the 1930's, close to 1,500 individuals comprised the West Side Mexican-American neighborhood, with 61% born in the United States. The Depression brought extreme economic difficulties to the Mexican-Americans in Minnesota, who were often confronted with "Only White Labor Employed" signs or required to compete in the open market for jobs that had traditionally belonged to them,⁵ forcing many families to accept charity from church and state. The illegal status of some Mexicans in Minnesota had been ignored during the prosperous 1920's because they were a cheap source of labor for the growers, but with the increased competition for jobs during the Depression, the removal of Mexican-Americans through deportation seemed, to some, the perfect answer. Lorraine Pierce wrote that "St. Paul had the dubious distinction of being one of the first cities to deport Mexican-Americans and in 1938, 324 of them were deported. Most of the children and some of the adults who were deported were United States citizens (having been born in the United States) and the whole episode '...created confusion and misunderstanding' to say the very least."⁶ This deportation left a legacy of fear and mistrust which was still reverberating throughout the community 20 years later.⁷

The U.S. entry into World War II in 1941 created a severe labor shortage that once again necessitated the large-scale recruitment of workers in Mexico and Texas. In 1942, the United States negotiated the Bracero Program with Mexico, allowing Mexican nationals to work in the U.S. without citizenship in exchange for free transportation, guaranteed wages, and regulated working conditions.⁸ Between 1944 and 1946 more than 4,000 Mexicans were brought to Minnesota to work in the beet and vegetable fields. The program proved to be extremely profitable since neither wages nor working conditions were guaranteed. Although it officially ended in 1947, the growers petitioned to extend it for several more years. World War II also brought increased opportunities for Mexican-Americans throughout Minnesota to work in industry and defense plants.⁹ During the period from 1945-1958, the Mexican-American neighborhood in St. Paul was still small, numbering approximately 4,000-6,000 residents, but was by far the largest in the state. A 1946 study by the Neighborhood House (an immigrant settlement house that became a center of the Mexican-American colony)¹⁰ revealed that approximately 76% of the Mexican-American community were American citizens, while close to 50% of the population was under the age of 18. Despite the large number of citizens, the isolation of and discrimination against the Mexican-American community guaranteed that it would maintain its language and cultural traditions.¹¹

During the 1930's and 1940's the strongest organization among the West Side residents had been a mutual aid society - *Sociedad Mutua Benéfica Recreativa Anahuac* (Anahuac Mutual Benefit and Recreation Society). Founded in 1922, it was incorporated under the laws of Minnesota in 1935. Its objective was to promote social and recreational activities and to provide economic benefits to its members. Though only open to males, the society by-laws state that the only requirements for membership were the ability to speak Spanish, and sympathy for the goals of the society. The woman's auxiliary, LEMA, prepared food, decorations, and piñatas for social events and helped promote Mexican culture, but was constantly plagued by administrative problems.¹² The primary activity of Anahuac was to provide sickness and funeral benefits to its members, but it also organized dances and cultural events including the first few Mexican Independence Day celebrations.

Before the Second World War, Anahuac served as a space in which first generation immigrants were able to preserve their cultural traditions. Its existence was for the benefit of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in St. Paul,

so references to the ethnicity of its members were plentiful. The rules of the society were written completely in Spanish, as were the notes of its meetings. A membership pin used by Anahuac mirrored the Mexican flag: green, white, and red stripes with gold writing which said *patriótico mexicano*, or Mexican patriot.¹³ The social activities centered around traditional Mexican holidays or religious celebrations. The organization avoided any political work, even during the deportations, although the secretary was personally involved in the establishment of a Mexican consulate in St. Paul. Anahuac maintained the traditions of mutual cooperation that were common in Mexico, and like many other mutual aid organizations, it focused on facilitating the transition into the host country while maintaining Mexican cultural traditions from the home country.¹⁴

The changes that arrived with the end of the Second World War underscored several fundamental problems within Anahuac. Although members of the society considered themselves representatives of the community, Anahuac was continually plagued by low membership, especially during the 1950's. Financial difficulties hindered the distribution of funeral and sickness benefits. At the same time, as more members of the St. Paul community became citizens, government assistance was increasingly being offered through programs focused on poor and minority communities. According to Sarah Chambers, "Anahuac was unable either to serve or to incorporate the second generation of Mexican-Americans, whose needs and goals differed significantly from those of their own parents..."¹⁵ By 1945, the vast majority of St. Paul's Mexican-Americans had been born in the United States. This second generation had spent their entire life in the America, and they demanded the same rights and privileges available to other American citizens. Many of this generation did not even speak Spanish, one of the two prerequisites to membership in the Anahuac society. The second generation was not interested in the refuge from assimilation that Anahuac had provided their parents. By the mid-1950's, declining membership in Anahuac forced it to merge with *El Comité Patriótico*, the social group that organized the annual Independence Day celebrations.

The St. Paul community experienced a shift that was occurring in many Mexican-American communities in the post-war United States:

After the war, Latinos of the G.I. generation, in both regions, became increasingly indignant about the blatant social inequality represented in their communities by the unpaved streets, the segregated housing, the lack of adequate sewage disposals systems, and restriction to certain sections of theaters, restaurants, parks and churches. This second generation of Mexican-Americans felt strongly that, having fought and worked side by side with Anglos on the battlefield and in the defense plants, they did not merit this treatment. The G.I. generation brought these serious grievances to the attention of the Mexican leadership represented by the long-established mutual aid societies. They were disappointed with these sympathetic, but powerless, mutual aid associations because they had limited themselves primarily to promoting cultural activities and providing death benefits. These societies had become politically inflexible in their inability to challenge local authority.¹⁶

The war emphasized a division among generational goals and priorities. However, this new generation of Mexican-Americans was not going to return to invisibility.

It is estimated that close to 400,000 Mexican-Americans served in World War II, and many members of the St. Paul community were among that number. Despite the continuing social tensions and discrimination present in war-time America, Mexican-Americans overwhelmingly supported the war. Juan Gómez-Quíñones claims, in his discussion of Chicano politics, that “wartime promises of equality led to a new optimism in the Mexican communities of the United States regarding the post-war period. Things would be different, better, after the ‘war for democracy’...”¹⁷ Mexican-American leaders hoped that as the Axis powers saw Mexican-American soldiers simply as American troops, other Americans might begin to recognize them as fellow citizens. In addition, like most people in the United States, Mexican-Americans believed that the propaganda promises of economic prosperity, equal citizenship, and democracy would be fulfilled in a post-war utopia.

As with the African-American soldiers who had returned from the front, Mexican-American veterans continued to experience discrimination once back in the United States. The frustration and anger that resulted from this betrayal of the promises of equality was channeled into a new type of organization: the American G.I. Forum. Established in 1948 by Dr. Héctor Pérez García in Corpus Christi, Texas, after a mortician refused to conduct re-burial services for a Mexican-American veteran, the American G.I. Forum deftly manipulated patriotic messages to press for improvements in the status of Mexican-Americans. Minnesota chartered a chapter in 1958 after a visit by Dr. García, but the organization never obtained the political force that it wielded in the Southwest. Membership in the American G.I. Forum was restricted to veterans and their relatives. At its height, the St. Paul AGIF had over 50 members, a slightly smaller ladies auxiliary, and a junior forum with close to 80 members. According to one of its founders, the St. Paul AGIF was mostly a social organization which tried to help provide services and benefit the surrounding community.¹⁸ It was a small group that did not profoundly impact the community, yet the American G.I. Forum was significant, not for what it accomplished, but for the way in which it presented itself to the rest of society. Its rhetoric illustrates the extent to which the internal construction of ethnic identity was becoming influenced by hopes for assimilation and by external forces, namely the fear of being labeled “subversive.”

Although the AGIF was a Mexican-American organization, its constitution and brochures carefully avoided any mention of ethnicity. According to its literature, the American G.I. Forum was composed solely of patriotic American citizens. Of even greater significance is that all AGIF documents (constitution, brochures, notes) were written in English. This is a significant departure from the Anahuac organization, which conducted all of its business in Spanish. The AGIF did not even require that its members speak Spanish. In fact it seems that it would have been difficult for first generation Mexicans to join this type of English-based organization. Modeled on the preamble of the U.S. constitution, the Constitution and by-laws of the American G.I. Forum declared that the purpose of the organization was to “better serve our people, our State, and our Country.”¹⁹

The AGIF manipulated patriotic words and symbols to portray their organization as compatible with post-war America. The symbol of the AGIF was a shield with seven red and six white stripes running vertically on its bottom two thirds, with a blue field at the top covered by thirteen stars. The word "American" was inscribed across the blue field, and "G.I. Forum" was written across the stripes. Members recited the Pledge of Allegiance at each meeting, following the official prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. The AGIF constitution claimed that refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance was grounds for automatic expulsion from the organization. Active membership was limited to "all American male citizens who have served honorably in the Armed Forces of the United States,"²⁰ and occasionally non-veterans who could demonstrate high morals and a good reputation. The AGIF did not tolerate the membership of any person who was, or had been, "a member of a Communist, Fascist or other organization or conspiracy that advocates the overthrow by force or other means of the Government of the United States."²¹ Refusal to sign the following oath was also grounds for immediate expulsion:

*I do solemnly promise and swear that I have never knowingly belonged to nor belong to now, nor believe in now, the Communist Party, or any organization advocating the overthrow by force or other means of the government of the United States. That I have never knowingly belonged to any organization advocating the overthrow by force or other means of the government of the United States. That I have never knowingly belonged to any organization that has been declared subversive by the Attorney General of the United States or my state. Further, I solemnly promise and swear that I will defend and uphold the Constitution of the United States and my State, and that I have never believed and do not presently believe in the overthrow of the United States Government by force or other means. That I will resist all efforts, domestic or foreign, to overthrow the Government of the United States; and that I will resist and report all organizations or individuals who teach or believe in this overthrow.*²²

Even the officers had to reiterate a non-subversive statement in their inaugural pledge.

No reference to the ethnicity of the members of the American G.I. Forum can be found in its constitution or in any of the literature produced by the organization, despite the fact that it was created by and composed entirely of Mexican-Americans. According to its constitution, the primary objective of the AGIF was "to secure and protect, for all veterans and their families, regardless of race, color, or creed, the privileges vested in them by the Constitution and laws of our Country."²³ The use of "our country" is a break from the strategy and language of the mutual aid society. The American G.I. Forum asserted Mexican-American civil rights through this type of patriotic rhetoric. The three other stated objectives of the organization were:

*To strive for the preservation and advancement of the democratic ideals which our service men and women have fought to preserve; to foster and encourage the training and education of all citizens, irrespective of economic station, in order that true Democracy may exist among all of our citizens; to demonstrate the belief of the membership of this organization that the religious and political freedom of the individual and the right of all citizens to equal social and economic opportunities are basic principles of democracy; and to advance the understanding between citizens of various national origins in order to develop a stronger American citizenry.*²⁴

The goals of the organization were, simply put, to improve democracy for all citizens of the United States. The slogan contained on the bottom of every brochure repeated the organizational goals: "Education is our Freedom, and Freedom should be Everybody's business."²⁵ When analyzed in light of the ethnicity of the AGIF members, this was a strong statement, similar to the calls for civil rights among African-Americans in the South. The American G.I. Forum was, in almost every way, the picture of a White, middle class veteran's organization. It espoused the acceptable ideals of democracy and freedom, eschewed any involvement with subversive forces, and cloaked itself in patriotic fervor.

Even with its conservative tendencies, the AGIF was the most radical of the organizations present in St. Paul during this period. The small size and geographic isolation of the Mexican-American community in St. Paul precluded it from adopting many of the activist strategies

popular in Texas and California. Election of Mexican-American leaders and large demonstrations were simply not feasible on the West Side, requiring Mexican-American political leaders to develop new and innovative strategies to “increase their political voice.”²⁶ Reports from relatives and friends in the Southwest of surveillance and harassment of Mexican-American groups undoubtedly silenced some in the community. According to Gómez-Quíñones, in the Southwest:

*Actions by government agencies of the more traditionally negative variety did not cease. Police agencies, prosecutors, and the courts proved to be as harsh as they had been before the war. Incidents of police brutality occurred continually throughout the postwar years. Significantly, police surveillance of even moderate and conservative groups became a practice, while efforts to disrupt the organizing of Mexican workers through public agencies also continued. Immigration, border, and customs agencies conducted massive campaigns against Mexicans; and those functioning under the rubric of Operation Wetback committed appalling violations of human and civil rights.*²⁷

Fear of deportation and harassment in such a climate would have been a significant deterrent to political activism on the part of the St. Paul community.

While no documents detailing specific surveillance of Mexican-American organizations in Minnesota have been found, a letter from J. Edgar Hoover to Father Ward, priest of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, proved enlightening about the extensive reach of the FBI and federal government. Hoover wrote to Father Ward to compliment him on the existence of the Boy Crusaders (a group similar to the Boy Scouts for Mexican-American children in St. Paul):

*I was gratified to learn of the organization of the Boy Crusaders... good citizenship is needed today in our country more than ever before. Approximately 18% of all crime is committed by young people under voting age. In addition, America is being threatened by subversive forces cunning and vicious in nature. Appropriate action must be taken now if we are to preserve for the future the freedom which today is our proud heritage.*²⁸

The fact that the FBI chief wrote to the parish priest of a small community to commend him for a children's group which exposed “American ideals” indicates an extensive intelligence gathering network in Hoover's FBI.

Because of the extensive communication networks between the Southwest and Midwest Mexican-American communities, it is understandable that there would be a prevalent fear of persecution within the St. Paul community. According to Santillan, many Mexican-American organizations

*Expressed an unyielding belief in the benefits of cultural immersion into the American mainstream. An eagerness to express a patriotic postwar ideology can be traced largely to the cold war period when many ethnic groups feared persecution by the American far right led by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy.”*²⁹

In St. Paul, no elsewhere in the nation, the second World War is generally considered by most Chicano historians as a turning point. As David Gutiérrez noted,

*Most ethnic Mexicans in the Southwest remained well outside the mainstream of American social, cultural, and political life for years after the United States officially entered the war, but the demand for manpower in the armed forces and in war-production industries allowed hundreds of thousands of ethnic Mexicans to enter new, higher paying occupations and therefore helped open the way for Mexican-Americans (and some Mexican immigrants) to improve their position in American society. In addition, many scholars have pointed out that World War II marked a political coming of age of the Mexican-American population.”*³⁰

While most of the neighborhood still had immense pride in its Mexican heritage, the combination of the increased opportunity brought by the war, government initiatives on behalf of integration, and the conformist trends of the Cold War created a strong desire for assimilation among Mexican-Americans in St. Paul. Moreover, the rise of the post-war welfare state broke down the community's isolation and made its self-sufficient mutual aid societies less necessary, especially for the younger generation. The war also created expectations for equal treatment, especially among the second generation. Veterans formed patriotic groups which focused on improv-

ing the conditions of the community. The continual threat of government surveillance in the post war years also shaped the community's activism. Most organizations shrouded themselves in patriotic symbols and phrases in order to avoid being targeted as subversive.

The combination of the changes that the war brought to the community and its organizations and the threat of surveillance created a push for greater assimilation into American society. However, while the community desired the greater visibility and increased access to opportunities, complete immersion into "American" culture was undesirable. Festive celebrations provided one way to fulfill the need for group action and solidarity, even as they remained a non-threatening and innocent challenge to White mainstream society.

Construction of Identity I: The "Mexican in Minnesota" Report of the Governor's Interracial Commission

Before looking at the process by which Mexican-Americans constructed ethnic identity, the underlying discourses surrounding ethnicity and assimilation in the country (and Minnesota) should be analyzed. This analysis will center around a series of reports published in 1948 and 1953 by the Governor's Interracial Commission. The reports entitled "The Mexican," "The Indian," "The Negro in His Home," and "The Negro in the Workplace" illustrate how cultural pluralism and anti-communist discourses shaped definitions of ethnic identity.

John Bodnar's discussion of the shift that occurred in the construction of public memory before and after the Second World War provides a useful tool in this analysis. In his study of public memory in the Midwest before the second World War, Bodnar refers to the prevalence of pioneer symbols in the pageants and celebrations of the 1930's. He argues that

The interest of the middle class in folk and local culture was more than an intellectual and psychological search for understanding. Members of the professional classes and government officials acted as 'disciplining authorities,' seeking to inculcate civic obedience and loyalty in an era when discontent was widespread, and to transform the meaning of vernacular symbols. They attempted to shape discourse over the past in an effort to remain influential in

the present."³¹ In fact, pioneer symbols were used to indoctrinate diverse groups of people into American culture. The pioneer was seen as something quintessentially American; the "progenitors who laid the foundation for the prosperity that they now enjoyed."³²

The emphasis on this specific American symbol was, as Bodnar argues, a strategic choice. It occurred in an epoch where the concepts of assimilation were based on Anglo-conformity and the melting pot.³³ The theory of Anglo-conformity, according to Milton Gordon (a Cold War era scholar on assimilationist theories), consisted of seven stages by which the immigrant became Americanized according to the White, Protestant standard. These stages included cultural assimilation, large scale intermarriage, development of identity based on the host society, lack of discrimination, lack of prejudice, and the absence of a conflict between values and power. The melting pot, on the other hand, referred to America as the place where all different nationalities would contribute to a distinctively American mixture. Thus the Americanization process would still take place, but instead of conforming to a pre-determined mold, each of the immigrants would add their culture to the pot. In practice, this concept was not noticeably different from that of Anglo-conformity.³⁴ Both of these theories were utilized in the Americanist movements in the post-WWI period. The Americanist movement required that the immigrant "divest himself at once of the culture of his homeland, that he cease to speak its language, that he regard with the same suspicion and hostility as his attackers this familiar and psychologically satisfying ethnic institutions and organizations..."³⁵ In short, these concepts demanded that immigrants discard their culture in favor of the new American one.

By the end of the Second World War, the dominant theory of assimilation advocated that immigrant groups retain part of their culture while still integrating into American society. The theory of cultural pluralism originated in the early part of the century, but gathered force in the wake of the nations international role and its stress on harmony during the Cold War period. Gordon identifies cultural pluralism as the preservation of communal life and significant portions of culture within the context of American citizenship and political and economic integration into American society. According to Gordon, this theory:

... asserts the positive value to the nation as a whole which derives from the existence of various ethnic cultures and their interaction within the framework of a democratic society. This value accrues in two ways: directly, as the ethnic groups contribute elements from their cultural heritage to the total national culture, making it richer and more varied; and indirectly, as the end-product of the competition, interaction, and creative relationship of the later arrived cultures with the Anglo-Saxon culture and with each other.³⁶

Gordon claims that this “enlightened” view of assimilation resulted from the experiences of Nazi Germany and the racial overtones surrounding World War II, which generated additional interest in America about the adjustment of ethnic groups to one another. In addition, the desire to present a harmonious image of ethnic and racial relations in America to foreign nations would have contributed to the popularity of this theory. Between 1945 and 1960, “cultural pluralism” became a well established discourse.

This theory posited substantial social separation to allow ethnic communities to maintain their culture while still relying on the adherence to established “American” values such as education and political participation. In practice, this meant that ethnic groups were encouraged to retain their culture (i.e. music, food, costumes, and artistic talents), but were pressured to Americanize in every other way. As the analysis of Minnesota will show, ethnic groups were encouraged to maintain the non-threatening aspects of their culture while conforming to the *standard* definition of a Minnesotan or an American.

Pageants became an ideal way in which ethnic groups could showcase the colorful native traditions, while still expressing the patriotism necessary to survive in the Cold War climate. Bodnar links the renewed emphasis on ethnic contributions to the threat of communism and the search for racial harmony at home:

Themes such as the celebration of ethnic cultures and material progress were reinvigorated. As government officials and other cultural leaders sought to counter the perceived challenges of world communism to the idea of the American nation and its political apparatus from abroad and of discontent at home, public

memory came to accommodate more interests. A more determined effort was made to... preserve the structure of pluralism by reviving the celebration of ethnic contributions and material progress in the region and by devoting more attention to the contributions of women. Ethnic contributions as a symbol could transform ethnic pride into national pride and acknowledge the growing political power of second and third generation immigrants in the region. Material progress, of course, always a staple of the public memory bank, could now serve to generate political consensus by discrediting the relatively backward economies now under communist domination. Praising the role of women in the past tended to reinforce the notion of family stability and, therefore, social stability.³⁷

The themes of conformity, consumerism, and anti-communism played key roles in both the popularity of cultural pluralism and the proliferation of ethnic celebrations as an acceptable mechanism by which to balance the assertion of ethnic culture and the emphasis on patriotism.

In a state that placed a strong emphasis on the contributions of its different ethnic groups, the series of reports published by the Governor’s Interracial Commission in 1948 and 1953 illustrate the influence of the cultural pluralist and anti-communist discourses. Their concentration on “The Negro,” “The Indian,” and “The Mexican” indicate an acknowledgment that the assimilation of some groups was not occurring as smoothly as it had with others. Not surprisingly, these specific groups were different from other immigrants to Minnesota because of their skin color. As such, Minnesota needed to ascertain why these groups were not being incorporated into an American society which emphasized conformity and consumerism. The Minnesota report on “The Mexican” was a local manifestation of cultural pluralism ideas. The report on “The Mexican” is even more fascinating in light of the reports link between the treatment of Mexican-Americans in Minnesota and the global struggle against the “Reds.”

Although originally a response to reports of discrimination against Mexican-Americans in the state, the report became an attempt to convince “Minnesotans” that their improved treatment of “the Mexican” was, in fact, an act of patriotism. In his introduction to the 1948 report, Governor Youngdahl almost pleads that “the people of

Latin America will judge us to great degree by our treatment of these Mexican people. Anything that a Minnesotan can do towards more fair and equal treatment of the Mexican will be a worthwhile step towards building better unity and good will between our nation and Latin America.”³⁸ The introduction by the Chairman of the commission contains a similar admonishment to the “people of Minnesota.” The report concludes with an extremely strong reminder to “Minnesotans” about the role that each individual may play in the survival of democracy and freedom:

*In these days while the specter of Communism shadows all of Europe the need for... hemisphere unity is even greater. It may be that the citizens of the United States have neglected the most potent ambassadors. They are the Latin-Americans who now dwell here. For some write constantly to their relatives and friends at home. Those letters weekly go into hundreds of towns and villages in Mexico and South America... Latin-Americans in those towns form their opinion of the United States from the opinions and information conveyed in those letters... For good or evil [the Mexicans] are ambassadors for Minnesota... A strong policy of hemisphere unity and defense could likewise be woven from such small strings of personal contact. When a Minnesotan treats a Mexican with reverence and fairness he may be making a contribution to a better world order.*³⁹

These statements illustrate two crucial points. The first is that anti-Communist fervor was not relegated to McCarthyite persecution. The report repeatedly emphasizes that each individual citizen has a responsibility personally to struggle against the communist forces and that the non-discriminatory treatment of Mexican-Americans is a way to fulfill patriotic obligation. If the fate of Latin America as free or communist hinged on the experiences of Mexican-Americans in the United States, then “Minnesotans” must take every possible action to insure that the forces of freedom prevail. In addition, it is clear that the intended audience of the report is Whites, since with the reports simple use of the term “Minnesotan,” all other immigrant groups have lost their ethnic or national identity. In the course of defining the ethnic identity of “The Mexican,” this document implicitly constructs a shared

identity among several strong ethnic groups (Swedes, Germans, Norwegians, Irish, Italians, etc.) based on their single commonality: Whiteness. The reference to “the Mexican” is telling in light of the fact that the majority of Mexican-Americans living in St. Paul were U.S. citizens. The report assumes a definition of a “Minnesotan” based on racial coding that naturalized White as much as it did “Mexican-American.” A statement such as “when a Minnesotan treats a Mexican” draws a dichotomy that actually reinforces separations even though the purpose of the report was to diminish them.

This audience distinction becomes obvious as the report praises Minnesotans for their “good” treatment of minorities. When relating the history of Mexicans in the state, the report emphasizes the high quality conditions under which they were brought to work in the beet fields, including transportation, housing, and health care arranged by the company. The report also states that “good treatment brought many working families back to Minnesota each year.”⁴⁰ By listing each company with Mexican employees, the commission is subtly congratulating these White Minnesotans for their exemplary attitudes of acceptance:

*Two more of St. Paul’s major industries, the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, also employ Mexicans without discrimination... Reports from the concerns just discussed specified that there is no discrimination against race or creed and workers are advanced solely on qualifications.*⁴¹

In fact, White Minnesotans had benevolently allowed a Mexican to become a police officer and another to work in the post office.⁴² Three years after dozens of Mexican-American veterans had returned from fighting for the American way of life, these positions in public service and industry were advanced as proof of non-discriminatory attitudes among most Minnesotans.

The “Mexican in Minnesota” report concentrates on seven areas:

*The Mexican comes to Minnesota; the Mexican and his job; the Mexican’s house and family; health, delinquency, and dependency upon relief; educating the Mexican, the legal status of the Mexican, and the Mexican and his future in Minnesota.*⁴³

The choice of topics addressed the prejudices held about Mexican-Americans in the state, while the refutations of these stereotypes subtly asserted the desired characteristics or traits of a “Minnesotan.” The report constructs the identity of Mexican-Americans as a group which is, on the whole, uneducated, disinterested in the American Dream, unhealthy, poor, dirty, religious, family oriented, and colorful. While it attempts to paint the Mexican-American in a positive light (as a minority with the possibility of assimilation) the commission defines the group as generally inferior to “Minnesotans” in most respects. By the reports construction of Mexican identity it defines “Minnesotans” by what they are not; therefore a “Minnesotan” is White, highly educated, upwardly mobile, healthy, middle class, independent, wholesome, religious, and family oriented. Since the Mexican-Americans already possessed some of these qualities, further assimilation might conceivably be attained through education. The fundamental assumption of *cultural pluralism* is always present in this report; Mexican-Americans might add spice to Minnesota life through their food and colorful traditions, but will not significantly alter American society in substantial economic, political, or social terms. This message is conveyed through a construction of Mexican-American identity which is non-threatening and, shaped by discourses of class and gender.

One of the main focuses of the report is a discussion of the low educational level of Mexican-Americans in 1948: the vast majority of Mexican-Americans were unlikely to have completed high school and none within the St. Paul community had gone on to college. The “mental inferiority” of Mexican-American children, and the low value placed on education within the family, were cited as reasons for the disproportionately low level of education within the community. The report mentions that while only 1% of the community was reported as feeble-minded⁴⁴ the average IQ scores for Mexican-American children hovered around 80, while the average for White Minnesotans was 100.⁴⁵ Although the report mentions that Mexican-Americans scored the same as Whites on non-verbal tests, the report de-emphasizes the language bias and concludes that Mexican-Americans are inferior intellectually. In addition, the commission blamed parents for failing to encourage their children to go to school. Citing a lack of educational opportunity in Mexico and ignorance about the “crucial” role that it plays in American social advancement, the report indicates that lack of education is the impediment to the assimilation of the Mexican-American into Minnesota. However, the commission seem hopeful about the future of education within the community:

Ambition for his children is a strongly motivating factor in the individual Mexican's plan for life. It is the impelling motive for his shift from purely agricultural activities to steady employment in urban centers. Coming from a country whose ancient caste system had bred in him a passive acceptance of conditions which he felt helpless to change, the Mexican's arrival in the United States made him aware that life here is not necessarily static... Schooling, he had been told, was essential for progress on this side of the border.⁴⁶

By the time of the 1953 revision of the report, more Mexican-Americans were graduating high school, and a few had matriculated to college and technical schools. This was seen as tremendous progress, and proof positive that Mexican-Americans were assimilating, since education was viewed as the great equalizer in the era of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Apparently, there was a widespread belief among “Minnesotans” that Mexican-Americans were dirty. Several pages were devoted to refuting this idea, although it was accomplished by asserting that dirtiness was associated not with ethnicity but social class. The language of the commission defines Mexican-Americans as inherently lower class, a major impediment to assimilation in a culture which exalted the middle class. A distinction was made between dirty and immoral, for although the lower class status of Mexican-Americans might render their household unkempt and overcrowded, it generally only included family members:

Over-crowding is the rule in most of the houses, although in the majority of the cases the space is shared with relatives. This situation militates against efficient housekeeping and puts undue strain upon sanitary facilities available, such as they are... as in any other group of persons, housekeeping standards vary from very poor to excellent. Yet, in view of the general conditions of poor housing, it is not surprising to receive reports of rats biting children and of the great need for rodent control in the area.⁴⁷

The commission also refers to charges of discrimination that had been leveled at restaurant owners for displaying signs which stated “No Mexicans may eat here.” It vindicated the restaurants, claiming that these actions were not, in fact, discriminatory, but justifiably based on the group’s bad hygiene.⁴⁸ Mexican-Americans had a higher incidence of TB than the rest of the city,⁴⁹ allegedly because they were an unhealthy minority and not because of poor housing conditions that barely survived the severe Minnesota winters.

By refusing to acknowledge the connection between class and education, health, and overcrowding, the report defines Mexican-Americans as lower class almost by nature. There is no discussion of the American Dream for them, just a hope for improved conditions. Minnesotans are encouraged to “treat them well” because of their economic importance to the state and their critical role in the battle against Communism. By constructing Mexican-Americans as inherently inferior, benevolent “Minnesotans” might work to help them improve their conditions and assimilate within the dominant “cultural pluralism” framework.

In many ways, the strong family orientation within Mexican-American culture conformed to the emphasis on the family within the White, middle class culture of the Cold War era. The report lauds this characteristic as commendable and unique:

*Mexicans in the United States, both citizens and native Mexicans, contrive to maintain a family solidarity that is remarked upon by every observer. Despite continued struggle with poverty, poor housing, and the bewildering experiences associated with recent arrival in a new society so different from the one he has left, the Mexican keeps family bonds strong.*⁵⁰

This “remarkable” family structure was also extremely traditional; the mother almost always remained at home to care for the family. Remarking that some Mexican-American women were forced to work outside the home during the war due to higher costs of living, the commission assured its audience that this had not become culturally acceptable, but still remained outside the norm. Women worked only out of necessity, so as soon as Mexican-American families became more fully integrated into American economic and social life, the women would return to their traditional domestic role.

The report viewed the strong religious commitment of Mexican-Americans as one of the necessary preconditions or values for social and political assimilation. “More important than training in arithmetic and other cultural skills is the development of practices of worship of the eternal Creator and training in the habits of conformity to the moral law. Patently, character education and preparation for citizenship must stem from religious convictions. The cultivation of these precious values in the Mexican has not been neglected in Minnesota.”⁵¹ The traditional religious commitment among Mexican-Americans created fertile ground in which Minnesotans could cultivate the necessary social values of conformity and obedience. Our Lady of Guadalupe parish is mentioned as the bedrock of the Mexican-American community’s moral strength and as a key in the assimilation process. The Church taught its disciples to accept life as it was and hope for a better life in Heaven, not to agitate for better conditions in this world. An emphasis on religious education is interesting given the Catholic emphasis of conformity and obligation, but understandable given the fact that the chair of the Interracial Commission was Reverend Francis Gilligan.

The most striking construction within the report on “The Mexican” is that of an obliging, accepting group that does not expect to radically change its societal position. Statements about the passivity or obedient nature of “The Mexican” are repeatedly emphasized in the spheres of school, employment, and unions. When discussing the difficult nature of cannery work, which requires long, tedious days in the hot sun with constant stooping, the report says that “for this reason, it is increasingly difficult to recruit American labor for such jobs, while Mexicans, on the other hand, are accustomed to year-round hot weather and hard manual work. Employers also report that the Mexicans are, in general, reasonable, obliging, capable, and amenable to orders.”⁵² Following the list of the companies and factories that employed Mexican-Americans are quotes from supervisors or owners, included to convince Minnesotans that Mexican-Americans were capable workers: “the general reply indicated that Mexicans had proven as satisfactory as any other group recruited for corresponding work.”⁵³

The report also remarked that the fear of deportation created a reluctance among Mexican-Americans to organize, once again emphasizing an obliging and non-threatening image.⁵⁴ After a failed attempt in the 1930’s, no further independent efforts to unionize farm laborers occurred until the 1960’s. The few Mexican-Americans affiliated in the local CIO were called “good union men”

by a union chief. According to the report, “none of them has as yet, he says, shown any inclination to take over leadership, but none has ever caused trouble of any kind. Another union member said ‘that there is nothing to differentiate them from their fellow workers so far as capacity and performance are concerned.’”⁵⁵ The secretary of the CIO chapter said that “Mexicans are capable union members, thorough and loyal. They work well with others, and are interested in bettering themselves through education. Mexicans read material published by the CIO not only carefully, but critically, and show definite signs of being politically conscious.” The characterization of Mexican-Americans as disinterested in union affiliation was important because it signaled another way in which they were a non-threatening minority. Not only did members of the community hold jobs which no “Minnesotan” would accept, but they did not attempt to organize to demand higher wages or improved working conditions. Those Mexican-Americans who did join unions did not seek leadership positions or attempt to change the status-quo, but were dutiful and loyal members. A worker who is obliging “by nature” and disinterested in radical organizations is clearly an economic benefit to the state.

The report concluded on an optimistic note which conveyed the belief of the commission that while integration of Mexican-Americans into Minnesotan life was progressing at an extremely slow rate, assimilation was occurring (within the discourse of “gradualism”). References to the early signs of consumerism visible in the community proved the point:

*Through the younger generation of Mexicans a gradual but very slow improvement in living standards is being realized. While prevailing conditions make it impossible to do much about actual housing, the younger members of the community are beginning to buy such conveniences as electric refrigerators and washing machines.*⁵⁶

Ultimately, acceptance of consumerism is seen as proof of assimilation. In accordance with the theory of cultural pluralism, the report discusses what the “culture” of Mexican-Americans will add to the state. The emphasis on family and religion both conform to cold war ideals, and would complement existing social values. The culture that would remain through the assimilation process would be the “colorful” traditions of Mexican-Americans: food, dance, costume, music and other artistic expressions. These are defined as the contributions that “the Mexican” can make to “Minnesota.”

The commission claims that Minnesotan organizations have “afforded the Mexicans an increasingly wide opportunity through various festivals and exhibits to display their many skills to advantage and to contribute to community life through their special talent for the more personally expressive arts.”⁵⁷ Whether or not Minnesotans will be able to enjoy the addition of the tamale and the Mexican hat dance to Minnesotan culture will ultimately depend on their treatment of Mexican-Americans. The commission emphasizes several times that:

*There is no doubt that Mexicans have much of value to offer their new home in the field of talent in the arts... Given an opportunity for expression in a sympathetic environment, all of these assets can become valuable to American culture... Whether or not the population at large in America can be a beneficiary of the important contributions which Mexicans have to offer depends largely on the extent to which White Americans meet the problems of racial discrimination. Many Minnesota Mexicans are of pure, or nearly pure, Indian descent, and very dark in color... a fact which sometimes makes it easy for the unthinking to indulge in labels of distinction. Any type of discriminatory practice always results in an artificial slowing-up of a normal assimilative process.*⁵⁸

The inclusion of the definition of positive aspects of Mexican-American culture and a discussion of racial discrimination within Minnesota is not coincidental. Non-threatening, colorful assertions of Mexican-American ethnicity is what the commission envisioned as the ideal fulfillment of cultural pluralism. Actions which were more political or radical in nature would likely meet increased discrimination. Ironically, the commission speculates that “possibly, as the Mexican acquires greater familiarity with English and consequently more mobility, he may meet discrimination.”⁵⁹ These admonitions and the previous construction of Mexican-American identity effectively limit the expression of ethnicity to a narrow spectrum of colorful traditions and festive culture.

Construction of Ethnic Identity II: Annual Independence Celebrations

Werner Sollors theorizes that ethnic identity in the United States arises out of a combination of external and internal influences. He argues that the construction of ethnicity is fashioned from the tension between honoring and breaking with ancestral ties of descent, and expressing consent to the culture of individualism and new political structures.⁶⁰ This tension is a result of the social and political context which requires of immigrants a certain level of conformity and the internal desire to maintain cultural traditions. Within the context of cultural pluralism, Mexican-Americans in Minnesota were significantly influenced by the pressure to conform to post-war society. On the other hand, a complete loss of important traditions and values was undesirable for Mexican-Americans in St. Paul. Constructions of identity were therefore a result of a complex interaction between the external construction of “the Mexican-American,” and the community’s own definitions of its ethnicity.

Despite the heterogeneous nature of their origins, backgrounds and traditions, Mexican-Americans in St. Paul began to develop a strong sense of ethnic group identity, based in part on their shared experiences as non-White immigrants. Working within the narrow framework of acceptable behavior constructed by the external community, Mexican-Americans in St. Paul were able to assert a common sense of ethnicity and foster community solidarity through the annual Mexican Independence celebrations. The rationale for using pageants to fulfill the roles of community identification and defense from external societal discrimination during the Cold War lies in the limitations Whites imposed upon the contributions that Mexican-Americans could make to Minnesotan society. According to the Minnesota Interracial Commission report, assimilation signified that Mexican-Americans would integrate into the existing political, economic, and social institutions of America while retaining their ethnic culture of food, dancing, and costume. While a large gathering of Mexican-Americans demanding equal civil rights, higher wages, or improved housing would not be tolerated, a 5,000-person parade centered around tamales, dances, music, and a beauty queen was completely acceptable within the discourse of cultural pluralism.

Through a pageant, people come together to achieve two goals: to locate a sense of community that is perceived to be lost and insulate one another from outside criticisms, or to mobilize their members to pursue scant resources and power in society.⁶¹ A ritual celebration rep-

resents not only the cultural traditions to be incorporated into the new society but also statements and symbols about how each immigrant group identifies itself and seeks to relate to the wider society.⁶² Pageants and celebrations were extremely powerful tools in the communication of ethnicity to those within the group as well as to the larger society. In her analysis of 19th Century, German celebrations, Kathleen Neils Conzen explains that ethnicity is not a natural phenomena. She cites the tendency of historians to “assume that immigrants from a given area share a common culture and a common commitment to preserve it in America, and that both their sense of group identity and the social patterns and institutions that they generate, derive from that culture.”⁶³ Arguing instead that ethnicity is a result of a developmental process which is constantly changing and evolving, Conzen views ritualized celebrations as the crucial component in the emergence and maintenance of a concept of ethnic identity. Pageants “reflected, both in the values they attached to celebration and in their manner of celebrating, a common festive culture that drew them to one another and set them apart from other Americans.”⁶⁴

Because of the symbolic communication inherent in pageants, they can effectively deliver complex messages to the external audience, while reinforcing the positive image of the community which the participants wish to express. The evocation of an emotional response to the celebration allows the spectator to intuitively understand the underlying messages of ethnic pride and strength without cognizance of a purpose other than festivity. While the communication of a positive image of the group to an external audience is crucial for its entrance into American public life, Conzen argues that the real power of the ritual “lies in its ability not just to communicate but to actively influence its internal audience, the ritual participants themselves.”⁶⁵ Conzen relies heavily on Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas,” the result of the ritual’s ability to isolate the participants from reality where they are receptive to the meanings embodied in the pageant symbols. Through ritual celebrations, Turner argues, societal relationships and identities “are put in right relation by the activation of an ordered succession of symbols, which have the twin functions of communication and efficacy.”⁶⁶ The ritual separates the participant from the standard roles and status which usually order society. “In celebration... much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, in brief, of *communitas*; on the other hand, much of what has been dispersed over many domains of culture and societal structure is now bound or cathected in the complex semantic systems of pivotal,

multivocal symbols and myths which achieve great conjunctiveness.”⁶⁷ Rituals provide an unique opportunity for the members of a community to relate to one another as whole persons, without any of the socially imposed class, status, role, or office distinctions which usually limit the sense of communality felt in any group.

The 19th Century German celebrations were viewed by Conzen as a conscious campaign to defend culture and traditions by defining a positive image of German ethnicity and communicating it to other Americans, “offering a glittering taste of the glories that German culture could contribute to America if allowed to go its different way.”⁶⁸ This was also true of the experience of Mexican-Americans in St. Paul during the period from 1945-1960. Substantively different than the celebrations which commemorated Father Hidalgo’s cry to begin the revolution on Sept. 16, 1810, the celebrations in St. Paul were heavily influenced by American culture and designed to communicate the strength of the community to an external audience. Through these pageants, the past served as a screen on which the desires for ethnic unity could be projected. Once the commonality that resulted from the celebration was established, the present and future became group efforts. The St. Paul celebration involved a pervasive use of music, banners, costume, and other artifacts to intensify the emotional experience and a commitment to feelings that distinguished Mexican-Americans from other Minnesotans. The pageants generally included the entire Mexican-American community, as well as the larger Minnesotan communities, in the euphoric feeling of participation in a genuine Mexican celebration.

The annual Mexican Independence Celebration was organized under the auspices of *El Comité Patriótico*, a group of predominantly middle class men who coordinated the festivities on Sept. 15-16. The resources necessary to hold the festivities were obtained from the sale of tickets and food made by the Guadalupanas, a group of women from Our Lady of Guadalupe church. The organizational process was segregated along gender lines: only men were involved in the planning of the actual event and the selection of participants, while only women participated in the three days of cooking that were required to make the hundreds of tacos, tamales, and enchiladas served at the celebration.⁶⁹ Between 400 and 5,000 people attended each of these celebrations within the 15-year period, with all proceeds from the event donated to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church building fund.

The schedule of the Independence celebration followed a remarkably similar pattern during the years from 1945-1960. Festivities began in the evening of Sept. 15 with the introduction of the public dignitaries in attendance: the mayor, Mexican consul, the Queen of the Snows, etc. One of the prominent members of the Mexican-American community would deliver a speech on the story of Father Hidalgo’s famous cry and its relevance to the present. Following the American and Mexican national anthems, the mayor or another public official performed the coronation of the Fiesta Queen in the St. Paul Auditorium. Performances of traditional music and dances continued for hours, concluding with a public dance that lasted until midnight. The second day began with a parade in the loop in downtown St. Paul, with floats sponsored by area businesses, cars carrying prominent members of the community, the VFW drill team, children in costumes, and an enormous float which carried the recently crowned Fiesta Queen and her attendants. Several hours of recitations, performances, and music followed the parade, culminating in a second public dance.⁷⁰ In the early 1930’s, small celebrations for the Independence Day were held at Harriet Island and the Neighborhood House. Around 1939, community members began to organize the Sept. 15 celebration with Father Dicks from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. That year over 40 other organizations joined the festivities, including the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, children’s choirs, and the VFW drill team. The celebration moved to Stem Hall in the St. Paul Auditorium, but in order to cover the high rent of the hall and the cost of an orchestra, the planning committee sold buttons and tickets to the spectators.⁷¹

According to one community member interviewed in the 1970’s, the expansion of the celebration “was accomplished through mutual cooperation. It was celebrated in hopes that we would not alienate ourselves or forget Mexico. That is why this is celebrated all over the country, wherever there are a lot of Mexicans... Each year we tried to expand it more and more.”⁷² The identification of the Independence Celebration as the primary social event in the St. Paul Mexican-American community is testimony to the powerful emotions that it elicited. Amid the colorful costumes and traditional dances, the participants of the celebration underwent the transformation that Kathleen Conzen detailed in her description of 18th Century German pageants. They converted (and created) a common love of festive culture into a blossoming concept of ethnic identity. The celebrations served as the the-

ater in which a diverse community was able to maintain cherished traditions and develop a sense of commonality in the face of a hostile environment. The Independence Day festivities functioned both to locate a sense of community that was perceived lost, and to organize participants around common goals. For many members of the second generation, the traditions performed in the pageant were their sole connection to life in Mexico. Ethnicity for them was not a naturally occurring state – ethnic identity was carefully constructed through a combination of the rules of consent and descent, or external and internal influences. Performance became the means by which Mexican-Americans in St. Paul constructed the ethnic identity which would drive the Chicano movements of the following decades. When asked about their memories of the West Side at this time, most of those interviewed in the Mexican-American History Project claimed to remember the September holiday as the most important community event, claiming that participation in the festivals instilled cultural pride among the younger generations and reinforced Mexican customs.

The posters announcing the event to the public evoked a sense of pride in the accomplishments of Mexican heroes, past and present, by connecting the glory of the revolutionaries to the bravery of Mexican soldiers participating in recent American wars. Printed in Spanish, the 1944 poster contained the following message under a large drawing of Father Hidalgo:

Glory to the hero who demolished slavery with a powerful cry for independence and liberty. 134 years have passed since the old priest rushed to the battle clutching the banner of abused rights. Since then, the blood of our martyrs has risen to heaven in the demand for justice; new struggles have shaken our earth. At this moment, the entire world is engaged in a struggle between freedom and ambition. But Mexico has preserved unharmed the legacy of Hidalgo and his compatriots of 1810. To reaffirm our own and our children's ideas of freedom and patriotism, the Mexican Patriotic Committee of St. Paul and Minneapolis has prepared these public festivities...

This poetic invocation of the Mexican legacy of glory and martyrdom positioned the Mexican-American community as the beneficiaries of a legacy of patriotism and freedom, regardless of the country in which they are

located. Intended to encourage the festive participation of the community members in the celebration of independence, it was also a clear indicator of the image of the Mexican-American community that the organizers of this celebration hoped to promote. The Independence Celebrations demonstrated the community's interest in Freedom, Independence, Patriotism — values praised by the larger Minnesota community. This statement and the speeches that linked the struggle for Mexican Independence to the war against the Nazis were part of a succession of symbols that elicited a communal response from the participants. It accomplished two functions: to create a sense of pride as suggested by Turner's concept of *communitas*, and to encourage the type of behavior that would project a positive image of the community to outside observers. An admonition at the bottom of the posters from this period emphasized the preoccupation with the image that the Mexican-American community presented to other communities: "We request that the general public maintain the highest order possible so that we give the best demonstration of citizenship."

That Independence Day was the largest celebration during this time is itself indicative of the image the leaders of this pageant wanted to project. Although important in traditional Mexican customs, Independence Day celebrations paled in comparison to some of the flamboyant religious festivals. Yet, in cold war era St. Paul, it was Mexican Independence Day which became the extravaganza that brought the Mexican-American community into public view. One woman remembered that some Minnesotans from outside the neighborhood attended these celebrations:

For the sixteenth of September, they would have the governor or the mayor speak to the people, especially if it was an election year. Humphrey was one of the speakers... they would tell us how happy they were that we, as Mexicans, celebrate the anniversary of our independence. They would thank us for having invited them.⁷³

This statement brings to light the many facets of assimilation discourse that were prevalent in the Cold War era. The presence of high ranking politicians at the celebration reinforced the impression given by the Interracial Report that the political visibility of the Mexican-American community was rising. Within the discourse of cultural pluralism, it is clear why the Independence Day celebrations were viewed by the external communities as

a positive step taken by the “Mexican” in the process of assimilation; the Mexican-American community embraced “American” values of freedom and liberty while preserving its own “culture” of tamales and piñatas.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Independence Day celebrations was the incorporation of a beauty queen contest into the “traditional” Mexican customs. The history of beauty contests in the United States stretches back over 100 years, but the modern version evolved around the turn of the century. An analysis of the beauty queen contest may reveal some of the complex discourses surrounding gender and assimilation.

Recent scholarship in the area of beauty pageants focuses on the role that contests played in defining and reinforcing community standards and values. Contained within the framework of an established and accepted “play” form, they permitted the community to develop networks of solidarity. The use of beauty contests immediately connected the community to established hierarchies and ideologies while projecting an image of upward mobility and prestige. An analysis of the coverage of the Independence Day celebrations reveals that the media centered on the image of the beauty queen as the representative icon of the Mexican-American community.

An analysis of the beauty queen custom serves as a canvass on which the discourses of conformity, abundance, and stability intersect to yield a portrait of a community struggling to identify itself in cold war America. The editors of *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage* point to the significance of an event that incorporates women, beauty, and competition as the way in which to represent the community, arguing that underneath the superficiality of beauty pageants lie the values and goals of a community or society. They claim that the beauty contest can be an effective way in which a community may assert its individuality among a more conservative nation due to the ease in which it can be replicated and combined with other events, providing an opportunity for public expression and the negotiation of community standards and values.⁷⁴ The performance of gender by contestants in beauty pageants saturates the constructs of nation, citizen, Mexican, and woman with a claim of natural order, temporarily defusing the potentially explosive nature of social differences by placing them within an aesthetic context.⁷⁵

In his analysis of Minnesota community queen pageants, Robert Lavenda highlights the association of the queen festival with the community festival, a well-recognized “play” form. The play frame renders the event negotiable or subjective — the audience is free to take the

pageant as “serious” or as “make believe,” because the power of the pageant lies in the performance and the ordered succession of symbols. Thus the transformation of the candidates or the audience occurs in much the same way as in Conzen’s description of pageants — the fantastical display leaves the audience and the participants open to the transmission of community values through a series of symbols and images. Because no permanent transformation occurs in this type of community pageant, the significance remains in what the pageant is able to communicate about community standards and self image to its internal and external audience.⁷⁶

Focusing on the role that class plays in a beauty contest, Lavenda describes the community pageant as a dialogic hybrid of a beauty pageant and a cotillion. It balances the debut style of individual achievement which is related to parents, class, and social standing and the reflection of community standards that typically involves a beauty contest. The beauty pageant is seen as a popular democratic form, open to women of all classes, with the winner chosen by competitive means to represent community values and standards. The community queen places the class elements of a cotillion (social mobility, family, ties to the community) within the framework of a contest in which any young woman might win. In Lavenda’s analysis, community queens are not the prototypical Miss America beauty queen, but representatives of the community and its values, including talent, morality, friendliness and upward mobility. Thus the queen is an important symbol of community pride and self identification, an emblem of shared values and dreams.

The structure of the Fiesta Queen contest during the Independence Celebration fits Lavenda’s “play” framework because of its emphasis on the queen as representative of community values rather than the more sexualized image of the ideal woman present in the Miss America type of pageant. The Mexican Independence Day Fiesta Queen was not the woman who looked best in a bathing suit, but rather the contestant who sold the most tickets or buttons to community members. Similar to the community pageants discussed by Lavenda, the Fiesta Queen pageant emphasized the young woman’s ability to relate to her community and fundraise for the church. The Fiesta Queen contest did not include any of the commercial trappings of larger beauty pageants such as sponsors or nominations. Because contestants sold the tickets with the help of their parents and friends, the winner was often a relative of one of the prominent families in the community. According to several of the people interviewed for the paper, a daughter being chosen queen was important among the contestants’ families, but community queens

were generally not remembered past the celebration.⁷⁷ The Fiesta Queen pageant is consistent with Lavenda's analysis of the role of the community queen, embodying the values of conformity, upward mobility, individual success, and commitment to the Mexican-American community without being a transformative ritual experience.

It could be argued that the appeal of the beauty pageant form to the organizers of the Mexican Independence Day celebration was directly linked to the ease in which the form could be reproduced and adapted to local meanings while still remaining recognizable. The use of the beauty contest form was an effective tool in associating the Mexican Independence celebrations with other community festivals in Minnesota. The analysis of the posters and invitations to the Independence Day celebrations suggests that acceptance and respect for the Mexican-American community were primary goals for the pageant organizers. The appropriation of the beauty contest accomplished these same goals while adding another layer of legitimacy by automatically linking the Mexican-American Independence celebration to other festivals throughout the state. This link was crucial to the organizers of the contest, who saw the pageant as the way in which the external community would recognize the significant talents and contributions of the Mexican-American population. As the years passed, the organizers took pride when other festival queens attended the Independence celebration and when their own Fiesta Queen was invited to other community festivals. The number of visiting community queens was seen as directly proportional to the social ascension of the community itself.⁷⁸

The use of the beauty pageant as a symbol of abundance and social mobility was especially pronounced during the Cold War era. The vision of a festival queen in tiara, robes and scepter among a community of primarily poor Mexican-American immigrants was a very powerful image. The symbol of the beauty queen communicated messages of conformity, consumerism, and prosperity to the audience and participants. Placed in the context of the Mexican Independence celebration, the contest conveyed that the community was indeed on its way toward the type of assimilation advocated by cultural pluralism.

In contrast to many of the beauty pageants studied by Lavenda and other scholars, the Fiesta Queen contest was neither an event in itself, nor was it viewed as a crucial component of the celebration by the participants. However, the contests (and the celebration in general) were significant in that they that they projected an image of Mexican-Americans that was recognized by the external audience. Many of those interviewed in the Mexican-

American History Project cited a post-war shift in the attitudes of "Whites" toward the Mexican-American community. In this context, the queen was extremely important because of the recognition it received from the external audience. The beauty queen was an image that Mexican-Americans could be proud of when they saw press coverage of the Independence Day celebration.⁷⁹ It signaled a subtle change in the way that the larger society constructed the image of "Mexican-American," from agricultural laborer to beauty queen. The use of an established "play" form was readily accepted and valued by other groups, and allowed the Mexican-American community to develop networks of community solidarity and identity that were not immediately suspect. Through the beauty pageants, the community asserted themes of abundance, conformity and stability through a gendered image which was seized by a White audience anxious to see steps toward assimilation.

An analysis of the coverage of the Annual Independence Celebrations by the press provides further support for the argument that the beauty pageant provided an image of Mexican-Americans that was acceptable to the external audience. The mainstream press consistently reported on the Mexican Independence Day celebrations as the primary event in the Mexican-American community. Every year, the pageants were covered in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* with a short article and/or picture. This was one of the only times Mexican-Americans were present in the mainstream Minnesota press, and contrasted sharply with the coverage of Mexican-American men and their supposed link to higher crime in the West Side.

While the extent of coverage varied, the layouts were striking in the fact that their content remained constant for almost 20 years. The press highlighted the themes of patriotism and assimilation, while portraying the community as composed only of children and women; adult men and large groups were almost categorically absent from the coverage of the celebrations. When combined with the patriotic tone of the articles, the highly gendered portrayal served to project a non-threatening image of the community. The crucial questions to ask when analyzing the coverage of the celebrations include why certain images were chosen, for what audience the images were intended, and how the images and articles fit into the discourses of cultural pluralism and cold war conformity. This relates to Joan Scott's discussion of experience and to the analysis of voice, subject positioning and discourse. What might seem to be a frivolous event may help to reveal a complex picture of power structures operating in the discursive shaping of difference.



Figure 1 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa September, 1958.

Centered on the front page of the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, the 1958 photo showcasing two young children performing the Mexican Hat Dance in front of the Fiesta Queen and her attendants appeared above a headline that read “Holiday North of the Border — Mexican Fireworks Here.” [Figure 1] In the article, the Independence Day celebrations were portrayed as a Mexican version of the Fourth of July, complete with a portrait of George Washington and American flags. Consistent with the respect afforded cultural traditions by proponents of cultural pluralism, the article described the “peppy Latin rhythms bouncing through Stem Hall... and the rich smells of *tacos* and *tamales*.” A St. Thomas student from Mexico was quoted as being surprised at the size of the celebration, a testament (meant for the White audience) to the sympathetic and nurturing environment that Mexican-Americans experienced in Minnesota, an example of local exceptionalism. Another student from Mexico contrasted it to the manner of celebration in Mexico City, the entire army marching through the central plaza — an indication that the celebration of the event had been altered to fit the host environs. After a paragraph that explained that “Yankee Doodle” and “Over There” were big hits at the celebration, the article concluded with the statement by one of the participants, “We’re Americans. But we love our language and our own traditions. This is the one time a year that we can really show our children what our heritage is like.” Once again, the celebration was the shining example of cultural pluralism at its best — the Mexican-American community accepted American ideals and values, but they maintained their “culture” through an annual performance which reinforced their commitment to the accepted “American” values.

By focusing on women and children in the reports of the Mexican-American neighborhood, the press portrayed a non-threatening image of the community to its White readership. A picture of a procession of smiling costumed children would be more readily acceptable to a White audience than a large procession of men walking through downtown St. Paul. The press made it extremely clear that these large gatherings of Mexican-Americans were completely apolitical and made a concerted effort to portray them as festive and frivolous. In 1942, under the headline “Rain Fails to Halt Parade — Mexicans Celebrate Freedom,” a short article describing the festivities accompanied a picture of five children in white dresses walking while playing instruments. The article went on to describe the parade:

Dressed in colorful native costumes, boys and girls, carrying banners in Spanish proclaiming unity and freedom, marched through the downtown district in the afternoon... hundreds of Mexicans took part in the fiesta, eating spicy Mexican food and listening to speeches and recitations, praising free people.

In the article, only the children were active participants in the parade; the adults were passive listeners eating “spicy Mexican food” and listening to speakers discuss freedom in the United States. The commitment of the community to American values of freedom and unity was communicated to the newspaper’s audience, without identifying the celebration or the community with political activism.

A large 1941 spread titled, *What’s a Little Rain to Mexican Fiesta?* consisted entirely of images of children. A demure young girl eating an enchilada, the *bright-eyed* band of toddlers wearing white sailor hats, two youngsters in costume performing a traditional dance, and a smiling father holding his daughter. The association of the Mexican-American community with children may not be construed as merely coincidental in light of the repeated constructions of “Mexican-Americans” outlined in the analysis of the Interracial Report. By using children as symbols of the community, the images naturalized the *otherness* of ethnic identity — for these children are first and foremost Mexican — and helped signify the community as happy, passive and non-threatening to a White audience that desired assimilation.

Beginning in the 1950's, the press shifted its focus from children to women when portraying the Mexican-American community. The photographs from this time period invariably showed one of three types of Mexican-American women: the *traditional woman*, the *ethnic woman*, and the *beauty queen*, each of whom was a heavily coded symbol. Despite the prominence of the images of women, however, their voices are conspicuously absent from the text of the articles. The women pictured were never interviewed, and little could be ascertained about them beyond their name and address. Their presence conveyed the themes of abundance, conformity and cultural pluralism through the interaction of the voice of the article and the subject position of the audience.

The image of the *traditional woman* was common in the accounts of the Independence Celebration. The traditional women rarely faced the camera because they were consistently pictured in the process of preparing an *exotic Mexican dish*. Invariably constructed as an older woman with darker skin and traditional clothes, her presence was meant to symbolize Mexican "culture" with its connection to food and dress. The traditional woman was not the gloved suburban housewife with her new picture window oven, but rather a symbol of times past, stirring a large pot of beans with an enormous wooden spoon or making tortillas by hand (Figure 2). Although not part of the modern era, she still might represent the stability associated with family and home during the cold war era.



Figure 2 - St. Paul Pioneer Press, circa Sept. 1942.



Figure 3 - St. Paul Pioneer Press, circa Sept. 15, 1957.

In many ways, the traditional woman was an outgrowth of what Maureen Honey saw as one of the images of women during the Second World War: the stable guardian. Honey claimed that:

Women played the important role of pre - servers of peacetime virtues and family life, which came to be equated with security, stability and prosperity. In addition to their courage and strength, they emerged as caretakers of national ideals of normalcy, a role that echoed women's traditional functions as spiritual guides for the family.⁸⁰

The place of the traditional woman as emblem of moral and spiritual superiority was reinforced by a picture of two of the Guadalupanas standing with Father Ward of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. (Figure 3) While all of the traditional women pictured were in fact members of the Guadalupana group that provided the food for the celebration, the images placed the Mexican woman in a selfless role with no personal aspirations; the voice of the traditional woman was silent. The role of the traditional woman was to provide nurture and support

within the family and the community — an image that mirrored the discourses surrounding women and family during the cold war.

The gulf between the images of the *traditional woman* and the *beauty queen* was filled by what could be considered an image of the *ethnic woman*. The newspaper images showed many of the beauty contestants in their *ethnic* costume in an attempt to define the women as Mexican at first glance. Thus there was a series of images that presented smiling young women wearing enormous *sombreros* or colorful *serapes*, as if this were a common occurrence. A 1951 article placed a photo of a young woman in a sombrero and embroidered shirt under the headline, “She’s Fiesta Queen” with a caption that describes her as “a hatful of Mexican energy.” The photo from 1960 also showed the queen and her attendant with their requisite sombreros, as if to reinforce the fact that she was in fact the “Fiesta Queen,” not to be mistaken for an *American* beauty queen. Figures 4-6 show the beauty queens eating tamales, once again providing interesting visual documentation of the type of assimilation that the cultural pluralism discourse advocated.



Figure 4 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa September 16, 1957.

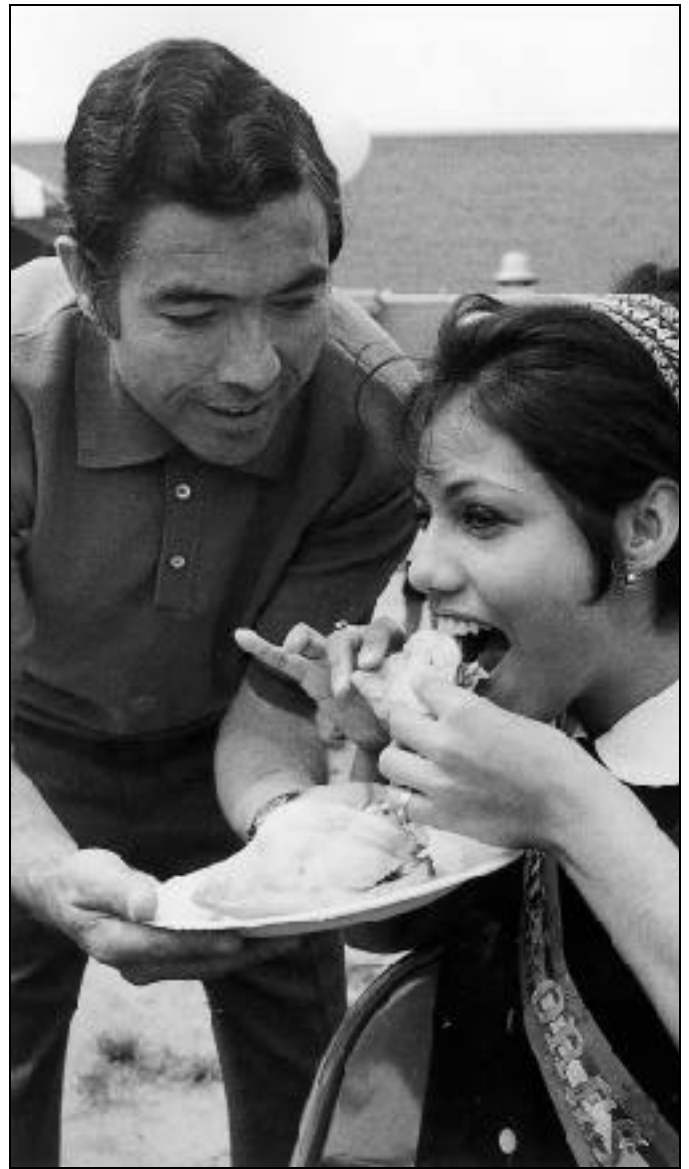


Figure 5 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa August 3, 1970.

The most intriguing images of the *ethnic* woman are two photos from the 1940's, one of which showed a young girl placing a bowl of fruit on the head of the smiling Mayor McDonough. The headline read “She means it’s a cinch, mayor — Fruit Carrying *No Muy Difícil*.” The image evoked the exotic, fruit-carrying Carmen Miranda, a Brazilian singer who had come to emblemize *Latin* culture in the U.S. As Cynthia Enloe has written, Miranda “personified a culture full of zest and charm, unclouded by intense emotion or political ambivalence. Like the bananas she wore on her head, Miranda was exotic yet wildly amusing.”⁸¹ The type of expression of ethnic identity personified by Miranda and the young woman in the *Pioneer Press* photo provided an easy, uncomplicated view of Mexican-Americans for the White reader. The second image was a float carrying young women dressed in costume surrounded by palm



Figure 6 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa August 3, 1970.



Figure 7 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa August 3, 1970.

fronds with an Uncle Sam figure in the middle. The photo was a fascinating juxtaposition of old and new, *Mexican* and *American*. The costumes and palm fronds symbolized the old customs and therefore Mexican *culture*. However the presence of Uncle Sam and the flags of both countries in the background could be taken as an assertion of the community's place in *American* life or as a testimony to the process of acculturation that had already transformed the community.

The final image is that of the *beauty queen*; a young, pretty teenager who, especially for the 1950's, was the *All-American girl* in every way. Smiling and demure, the beauty queen was a symbol of American abundance to the external audience. Because the role of the Fiesta Queen in community fundraising and the unique nature of the contest was not related in the newspaper articles, the White audience was likely to focus only on her superficial attributes. Like the hat in 1950's fashion, the beauty queen in American mythology was a symbol of luxury and abundance who was valued and worshiped for exactly those same reasons.⁸²



Figure 8 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa September, 1963.

A photo from the 1943 celebration showed the Fiesta Queen and attendants in matching white dresses riding atop a float that read “Fiesta Tonight” in English. The three young women appeared dressed as if for a cotillion, exuding confidence and beauty, visual manifestations of the aspirations of the Mexican-American community to social mobility. Another image from 1957 pictured the Fiesta Queen in tiara and regal robes standing with the Winter Carnival’s Queen of the Snows and King Boreas, signifying that respect from other communities accompanied the incorporation of *American* traditions. (Figure 7) This vision of the Mexican-American Fiesta Queen standing next to the royalty from St. Paul’s largest celebration communicated that the Mexican Independence Day celebration was an acceptable display of *ethnic pride* in the eyes of the White community. The regal images in Figures 8 and 9 reinforced the importance of consumerism in Mexican-American lives, and demonstrated the existence of social mobility within the context of American exceptionalism. Where else but in a progressive state such as Minnesota (in a country like the United States) could a Mexican-American woman be queen? The beauty queen images were intended to invoke the Cinderella mythology, suggesting that beauty was the only requisite for success, and therefore should be the pursuit of all women.

If one were to simply look at the mainstream coverage of the Independence Day Celebration, the coronation of the Fiesta Queen would appear to be the most important aspect of the festivities. However, community members indicated through interviews that although the coronation was closely watched by the families of the contestants, it generally was not considered the most important component of the celebration. In fact, most of those interviewed through the Mexican-American History Project claimed that the celebrations were important because through them the younger generation was able to learn about and participate in traditional Mexican customs. The relative obscurity of the beauty pageant was underscored when one of the people interviewed for this paper, a forty year old woman, had to be reminded that she in fact had participated as a contestant twenty-five years earlier.⁸³ If the coronation of the Fiesta Queen was not viewed as a major component of the celebration by the participants, the press’ persistent focus on the beauty pageant component of the festival to the exclusion of all other events raises the question as to what discourses in the beauty contest made it such a desirable symbol.

The press focused on the beauty pageant because as an event it both reinforced cultural homogeneity and performed a carnivalesque function of integrating



Figure 9 - St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, circa September, 1963.

classes/races into the established social order.⁸⁴ To the external audience, the photos of Mexican-American women who were virtually indistinguishable from other community queens were reassurances that assimilation was progressing at a favorable pace. While the images of *traditional* and *ethnic* women served as proof that the Mexican immigrants were maintaining their *cultural traditions*, the *beauty queen* served as an icon of American abundance and conformity. Use of the beauty queen pageant by and for the Mexican-American community helped to validate the arguments of cultural pluralism advocates, and was portrayed by the press as a main event.

Just as the focus on the part of the newspapers communicated an image of Mexican-Americans to its audience, the incorporation of the beauty pageant into the Independence Day celebrations served the interests of the Mexican-American neighborhood as well. In her book, *American Beauty*, Lois Banner discusses the role of festival queens:

For all the functions of festivals, queens were crucial. Since both conservatives and feminists considered women the special guardians of American morality, what better way was there to symbolize enduring community values and future utopian expectations than by choosing women as festival queens... who provided their real meaning as enduring symbols of community solidarity and

*fruitfulness... Moreover, queens could usefully demonstrate the supposed existence of social mobility... at the same time, public festivals reinforced the centrality of physical beauty in women's lives and made of beauty a matter of competition and elitism and not of democratic cooperation among women.*⁸⁵

The organizers of the Mexican-American Independence Day celebrations used the symbol of the beauty queen to project a positive self image to an external audience. The external audience seized upon the icon of the beauty queen because it communicated the themes of abundance, conformity, mobility, and other “American” values, signaling the assimilation of the Mexican-American community. However, the beauty queen pageant also served to render the Independence Day celebrations safe and acceptable to the external audience by placing the celebration in a play framework. Independence Day celebrations and their beauty pageants, then, confirm Solari’s premise. Both internal and external forces combined to foster a concept of ethnic solidarity and identity among Mexican-Americans in St. Paul.

Conclusion

Constructing ethnicity and group identification are complex processes that defy simple explanations. The Mexican-Americans living in St. Paul did not arrive in Minnesota with a shared set of beliefs and traditions. On the contrary, the development of some sense of commonality and ethnicity was an evolutionary process which began once the immigrants were in the United States. It was a result of the interaction between the definitions imposed on Mexican-Americans by the external society and the diverse experiences and desires of the immigrants themselves. Other Minnesotan communities often viewed the assimilation of Mexican-Americans as a crucial prong in the fight against Communism due to their perceived influence on the people of Latin America. Working within the premises of cultural pluralism, Whites in Minnesota were concerned by the slow integration of Mexican-Americans into Minnesota society. In an attempt to discern the causes for this isolation, the Interracial Commission constructed both the *Mexican* and the *Minnesotan* through language and coded symbols, determining which cultural traditions would be discarded in order to assimilate and which would be maintained. Mexican-Americans were constructed as a non-threatening minority by focusing on gender, religion, intellectual inferiority, and their obliging nature. *White* Minnesotans envisioned that the Mexican-Americans would com-

pletely conform to American political, social, and economic institutions, while contributing their *spicy* food and *peppy* music to Minnesota culture. A vision of Mexican-Americans participating on an equal basis in Minnesota society was not compatible with the assimilationist discourse.

Racial discrimination and fear of being labeled *subversive* combined with the discourse of cultural pluralism doctrine to create a narrow spectrum of *safe* activities within which Mexican-Americans in St. Paul could build community. Since only the *colorful* traditions were seen as beneficial to Minnesota life, Mexican-Americans displayed these to the highest extent possible in their annual Independence Day celebrations. The pageants portrayed a positive image of Mexican-Americans to other Minnesotans through an emphasis on acceptable traditions, reinforcing the image of the community as harmless. However, the celebrations also played a vital role in the development of pride and community identity in the West Side. When discussing this time period, every person interviewed for this project or by the Mexican-American Oral History Project commented on the strength of the community. Most spoke with reverence about the close bond that they felt with other members of the community. They described the high levels of participation in community events, and the excitement that surrounded every celebration. In collective memory, this post-war period on the West Side has become a golden age of community solidarity and cohesion, especially when it is compared to the fragmentation and diversity in the neighborhood today.

The annual Independence Day celebrations played a central role in the construction of that community identity. While the American-style beauty pageant and parade emphasized the assimilation of the group into mainstream society and their progress toward achieving the American Dream, the traditional aspects of the celebration allowed Mexican-Americans to construct and display cultural strength and unity. The community solidarity fostered and developed by the Independence Day celebrations became the groundwork for a broad Chicano movement in the 1970’s that radically challenged the dominant political, social, and economic institutions in the state. The Annual Independence Day celebrations did not have any one meaning. Rather, like the concept of *identity* itself, they must be viewed in terms of their multiple meanings. The incorporation of internal and external influences created an event that was assimilationist but also resistant to assimilation, reactive to larger social trends but also assertive and formative. When recognized in this light, the celebrations begin to reflect the incredibly complex processes involved in “becoming Mexican-American.”⁸⁶

Endnotes

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15. Ibid., 33.
16. Ibid., 117.
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21. Ibid.
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49. Ibid., 34.
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