

Hispanic Immigration in Arkansas

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Abstract

Hispanic immigration into Arkansas has greatly increased since the late 1980s. The growth in Hispanic population has been especially prevalent in towns offering low-skill jobs in the poultry industry, as well as in construction, timber, and other industries. This paper will discuss two areas of the state of Arkansas: DeQueen, located in Southwest Arkansas, and the Rogers-Springdale area, located in Northwest Arkansas. Both of these areas have seen large increases in Hispanic population in the past decade. The population increases have brought about changes in both communities, affecting the school systems, businesses, churches, and community relations.

Lifetime residents of Arkansas will tell one that some areas of the state have a history of minority populations, while other regions have traditionally been white. One such resident, Mrs. Carolyn Monroe states:

As a child growing up in Pike County, Arkansas, my exposure to people of other cultures was limited. Most of the people I was surrounded by were white, middle-class Americans. Later, I moved to Sevier County. I always bought groceries in DeQueen, and it was in a grocery store that I first remember seeing a Hispanic person. Actually, it was a family that I saw that day. I vividly remember straining to catch a familiar word in the Spanish they spoke while choosing what brand of cereal to buy. Eventually, the store began to carry specialty items such as religious candles and spices used to prepare authentic Mexican dishes. I never realized then, in the late 1980s, just how much the cultural make-up of the state was changing, or how those changes would affect the communities from one corner of Arkansas to another. (Monroe 1998)

Monroe's description gives one an idea of what Southwest Arkansas was like culturally from the 1940s until the 1990s. A broader description of the economy and values of the entire state can be gained from Lincoln-Porter (1993) who described Arkansas as follows: In Arkansas, "The Natural State," almost all industries are farming related. In southern regions of the state, there is forestry and tomato farming; in the southeast, there is cotton, rice and soybeans. West and Northwest Arkansas are known for poultry raising and processing. The poultry industry and tourism are also important in the Ozark mountain region in the northern part of the state. Real estate costs, taxes, and crime rates are low. Hospitality is still highly valued; people are held to be friendly-at least to each other.

Within the past decade, many counties in Arkansas have seen huge increases in Hispanic population. In fact, twenty-five of Arkansas's seventy-five counties ranked among the top one-hundred counties in the nation for percent increase of Hispanic population. Each of these twenty-five counties had percent increases of 115 percent or greater from 1990-1997. The county with the greatest growth rate in Arkansas's Hispanic population was Benton County, with an increase of 181.2 percent. Hispanic, by definition of the United States Census Bureau, includes people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American or South American origin. Most Arkansas Hispanics are Mexican or Central American (Green 1998).

National Projections

The phenomenon is not limited to the Natural State. National projections by the United States Census Bureau suggest that the non-Hispanic white share of the United States population will steadily fall from 74 percent in 1995 to 72 percent in 2000, 64 percent in 2020, 53 percent in 2050. The racial and ethnic groups with the highest rates of increase will be the Hispanic-origin and the Asian and Pacific Islander populations with annual growth rates that may exceed 2 percent until 2030. In comparison, even at the peak of the Baby Boom era, the total United States population never grew by 2 percent in a year (Day 1996).

The projections also predict that every year from now until 2050 the racial group adding the largest number of people to the population will be of Hispanic origin. In fact, after 2020 the Hispanic population is projected to add more people to the United States each year than will all other racial and ethnic groups combined. By 2010, the Hispanic origin population may become the second largest racial and ethnic group. It is also projected that by the middle of the twenty-first century, one in three births will be Hispanic. This increase in Hispanic population will be due not only to a high Hispanic birth rate, but also to extremely high levels of immigration (Day 1996).

Changes in State Population, Explanations for Changes

Arkansas has had the greatest percentage increase in Hispanic population in the United States in the past seven years, 127%. The Hispanic surge in Arkansas was much greater than what Census Bureau population officials had predicted. In 1996, the bureau estimated that Arkansas would have 33,000 Hispanic people in 2000 and 40,000 in 2005 (Green 1998). However, in an Associated Press article, researchers from the Institute for Economic Advancement at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock estimated that the 1997 number of Hispanics in Arkansas is at 60,000. This guess was based on special censuses taken over the past few years ("Hispanic Population" 1998).

The changing population is becoming increasingly evident in the public schools. Preliminary reports in 1996 by the Governor's Task Force on Hispanic Relations showed that school districts in fifty-seven of the state's seventy-five counties had one or more students with limited English skills. The report also showed that sixty-three counties had "language-minority" students, meaning that while the child speaks English, another language is spoken in the home ("3.93 million" 1996).

As well as the changes being felt in the public schools, the development of the Hispanic population in Arkansas has also impacted the Catholic church. In 1965, a mission church for Hispanics was opened near Elaine, in Phillips County. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the church continued to increase its ministry to the population, and by mid-1993, Mass was celebrated in Spanish for Hispanics at least monthly in towns including Little Rock, Hot Springs, Rogers, Arkadelphia, DeQueen, Dardanelle, and Forth Smith. Brockman estimates that the Hispanic total in the diocese is 40,000 to 60,000 people. If his estimate is accurate, then Hispanics make up about one-third of the Catholics in Arkansas (Brockman 1998).

What are some of the reasons for the sudden surge? Generally, most immigrants come to the United States for economic, social, and political reasons. In the past, most Hispanics migrated to borderlands such as Texas and California. Many are now moving into the heartland of this country where opportunities for a better life flourish. Arkansas also offers a good climate and good farming (Delgado 1997). In the early 1990's, Arkansas offered many low-skill positions in the poultry industry, and those with limited English could easily get jobs (Green 1998). There are also a variety of other reasons for which Hispanics say they have moved to Arkansas. These reasons include the beauty of the area, better school systems, and safer neighborhoods (Johnson 1997).

Impact on DeQueen, Arkansas

The process of assimilation has occurred all over the United States, including Arkansas. An Arkansas town that provides an excellent example of this process is DeQueen, a town of about 4,500, located in Southwest Arkansas near the Oklahoma border in Sevier County (Delgado 1997). The county's Hispanic population has grown from 632 reported in the 1990 census to an estimated 5,000 in 1996. There are approximately 14,000 residents in the county (Bowers 1996). DeQueen is a prime location for Hispanic migration because it is home to a large poultry-processing facility that offers many low skill jobs, which, while sometimes unattractive to local residents, do, however, pay somewhat above minimum wage and do offer benefits (Delgado 1997).

The changing population of DeQueen has affected many areas of life in the community, from the workplace to the church to the school. For example, the congregation of St. Barbara's Catholic Church is now 90% Hispanic. Forty percent of the employees at the poultry processing plant in DeQueen are Hispanic (Delgado 1997). In DeQueen, the public elementary school has 20% more Hispanic students in 1998 than at the same time in 1997. Information obtained on October 15, 1998, shows the following numbers of Hispanic students in grades K-5 (Beltrani 1998) (Table 1).

Table 1: Hispanics, Grades K-5, DeQueen

Grade	Male Hispanics	Female Hispanics	Total Hispanics	Total Students	Percentage Hispanic
K	33	32	65	174	37%
1	32	40	72	189	38%

2	28	29	57	157	36%
3	27	26	53	161	33%
4	25	19	44	137	32%
5	29	25	54	144	38%
Total K-5	174	171	345	962	36%

From the information in Table 1, one can conclude that in the DeQueen Elementary School each class from kindergarten through fifth grade is now at least one-third Hispanic. How has the school district coped with the changing student population? Numerous programs have been implemented, according to Linda Beltrani, DeQueen Elementary School principal. One of these programs is English as a Second Language (ESL). The district is currently building new ESL classrooms and will soon be hiring two aides. In addition, the school employs bilingual, non-certified staff members to assist with the classes. Another important part of helping students who speak limited English is peer tutoring. Also, there is an interpreter on hand at parent-teacher meetings. Beltrani states:

Most Hispanic parents are very supportive of the school system. They realize the value of a good education for their children. Overall, we have seen very positive results from programs implemented to help Spanish-speaking students. Last year, a group of parents even got together and prepared an authentic Mexican dinner for the teachers [...]. (Beltrani 1998)

The Rev. Scott Friend and other members of St. Barbara's parish in DeQueen have also been affected by the influx of Hispanics. One newspaper quoted Friend as saying, "The growth is phenomenal. I feel like I live in a Catholic town. When I walk down the street, people call out, 'Padre! Padre!'" ("Immigrants" 1995) Friend also stated that in 1985, the Catholic share of Sevier County's population was 3% or less, but today Catholics make up better than 10% of the county's population, and more than 5,000 people of Hispanic derivation live in Sevier County. In the same article in the DeQueen *Daily Citizen*, Friend said that the parish council is a mixture of Anglos and Hispanics ("Immigrants" 1995). One of the greatest challenges facing the parish is finding room in the 240-seat church to seat the 400 Spanish-speaking members who regularly attend Sunday Spanish-language Mass; however, the increase in numbers has meant an increase in parish collections. During the first quarter of 1995, parish collections exceeded all of the previous year (Bowers 1996).

The growth in population has also meant changes for area businesses. In a 1997 newspaper article, Friend said, "A big part of the businesses here now are Hispanic, and prices are in Spanish and English in Wal-Mart, grocery stores, and other stores. The grocery stores sell spices and other items especially for Hispanics" ("Immigrants" 1995).

DeQueen's responses to its changing population have been varied. The county has experienced some tension as a result of the increasing Hispanic population, mainly from those who feel that jobs are being taken away from more original residents. The numbers, however, show that Sevier County had an unemployment rate of only 4.3 percent at the end of 1995. Bowers reports an incident of community conflict that occurred when the DeQueen City Council passed an ordinance in 1995 prohibiting the keeping, slaughtering, dressing or outside cooking of animals such as rabbits, sheep, goats, hogs and cattle without permits. Some Hispanics in the

community were offended by this ordinance because preparing and cooking animals outdoors is part of some of their traditional celebrations. Bowers also reports that some residents believe that there is a rising crime rate due to the growing Hispanic population; however, law-enforcement statistics show the Mexican community is involved in little crime compared to its percentage of the population (Bowers 1996).

In comparison, the English-speaking members, who are now the minority at St. Barbara's church, have responded well to the influx of Hispanics, according to Friend. In a 1995 article, he stated, "We are the same Church, even though we are separated by language. I am proud of how they (Anglos) have responded" (Presley 1995).

Northwestern Arkansas-Springdale and Rogers

Two other Arkansas towns facing similar circumstances are Rogers and Springdale. Both are located in Northwestern Arkansas. In a 1997 article, "Northwest Passage: Report on a Cultural Change," D. Johnson wrote:

Initially, Hispanics were drawn to the [Northwest Arkansas] region by jobs in the poultry industry, which had faced labor shortages since the early 1990s because of the area's low unemployment. In the early 90s, Hispanic workers typically stayed for no more than several months before returning to Mexico. But in recent years, more Hispanics are settling on a longer-term basis while expanding their employment beyond poultry, to construction, roofing, and other relatively low-skill jobs. Hispanic-owned restaurants, law offices and other businesses and services are also beginning to appear.

The surge of Hispanics is being felt in housing, schools, and government services (Johnson "Report" 1997). The changing population is opening up new markets for specialty products such as grocery items, Spanish-language publications, and video tapes and compact discs (Cox 1997).

In 1990, twelve students were enrolled in ESL classes at Rogers. By 1994, that number had increased to 310, and in the fall of 1995 there were 810 (Davis 1996). The number reached 1,153 in 1996 (Leahy 1997). In the same year, a one-time appropriation by the state of Arkansas distributed \$4 million to Arkansas schools with students deemed to have limited English proficiency. Rogers, with an enrollment in 1996 of 9,445 students, received the largest portion of the state money, \$734,468 (Davis 1996). The money was to be used for tutors, teacher training, materials, and counseling services ("3.93 Million" 1996). In the Rogers district, when students who do not speak English as their first language enroll, they are referred to the Language Assessment Center where staff members talk with the students and their parents to determine oral, reading, and writing abilities, and to find the right level of placement in ESL classes (Davis 1996).

In 1996, the Springdale school district, had eleven times more Hispanic students than in 1989, meaning that 8% of the school's total enrollment was Hispanic, 70% of whom were classified as having limited English proficiency. Principals in Northwest Arkansas school districts reported significant academic improvement in kindergartners and first-graders as a result of the English as a Second Language program; however, the districts also reported difficulty

finding qualified staff to teach the increasingly larger classes (Leahy 1997).

This difficulty in finding qualified staff, sometimes bilingual members of a minority, supports a 1996 study of school districts in the Southeast United States. The study showed that although the minority population is increasing, the number of minority teachers and administrators is decreasing. The study emphasized the value of minority educators, especially in providing minority students with a positive role model (Schaerer 1996).

Many other aspects of life in the Northwest Arkansas towns of Springdale and Rogers have been affected by the influx of Hispanics. One place where changes can be seen is on grocery store shelves. Many stores in the area now carry various specialty items such as spices, *menudo*, and sliced cactus. Other food products include salsa with *tomatillos*, and *Jarritos*, a brand of soda that comes in flavors such as guava, tamarind, grapefruit, and pineapple. New businesses brought to the Springdale-Rogers area have included specialty shops, authentic Mexican restaurants, and Spanish-language television and radio programs (Cox 1997).

Harton compared the immigration in Northwest Arkansas to a "simmering" melting pot. Tension has occurred between cultures, and a group was formed which wanted immigration stopped for five years. The group then wants a policy implemented that allows only immigrants with specific skills which the country needs. The group, called the Americans for an Immigration Moratorium, was formed by Dan Morris of Rogers, who moved to the area from New Mexico. Rogers was quoted as saying that his experiences in New Mexico and California convinced him that a heavy immigration led to higher crime rates, poorer schools, and lower property values (Harton 1997). However, Sgt. David Clark, public-information officer with the Springdale Police Department, stated in a 1997 article, "We don't have a large problem with the Hispanic population. The vast majority of the people we arrest are non-Hispanics. We also don't seem to have a large number of repeat offenders among Hispanics. We just don't have a large problem with Hispanics and crime." The article stated: "That assessment, based on his experience and observations, is confirmed by the data from the Rogers Police Department, the Benton County sheriff's office and the Fayetteville Police Department" ("Immigration" 1997).

Conclusion

Arkansas, the Natural State, with its scenic beauty and industries such as farming and poultry processing, is now home to around 60,000 Hispanics. For whatever reason they choose to come, either following family who are already in Arkansas, looking for a better life, or for any other reason, the Hispanic population brings with it changes to Arkansas. Some residents respond positively, welcoming people from other countries and the culture they bring with them, while others view the immigrants as competition for employment.

Many Catholic parishes in Arkansas are undergoing overwhelming growth due to the increasing Hispanic population. The changes are also being felt in local school districts. Schools are implementing new programs to help educate Spanish-speaking students, and they are still identifying methods to help ease the transition of the new arrivals into American society. New people with new needs also mean new businesses for some Arkansas towns. Specialty grocery items and Spanish-language television and radio programs are representative of the

products and services now available in some communities in the Natural State.

As more Hispanic people find jobs in Arkansas, it is likely that they will make the state their permanent home, and family members who remain in their home countries may well join them in the state. Arkansas, historically a state with little minority population other than African-American, will likely become a melting pot flavored with Hispanic culture.

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Biographical Sketch

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