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**Story of Boxcar Communities Told**

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By Gary Tomlin / Register-Mail

GALESBURG — About 75 people received a slice of Midwest history Tuesday night at a lecture titled, “Early Mexican Communities in the Railroad Boxcar Housing.” Boxer homes populated rail yards across the Burlington and Santa Fe systems in the first half of the 20th century.

The Illinois Humanities Council sponsored Dr. Antonio Delgado’s talk at the library through their Roads Scholars programming. Delgado immigrated with his family as a small boy to Chicago from Mexico and became interested in the boxcar communities when hearing stories from his grandmother. Delgado was dean of Chicago City Colleges and served in the administration of two Chicago mayors, Harold Washington and Richard M. Daily. A number of people in the audience had direct ties to Galesburg’s boxcar communities.

“I remember the boxcar families. They were good to my grandparents who lived at 905 W. South,” said Ron Pearson, 83, of Galesburg. “The boxcars were down the street from their home.”

Delgado walked the audience through the progression of the Mexican immigrants who came to work on the railroads from 1910 through the 1960s.

He said in 1910 the Mexican Revolution began. There were battles throughout the country, the government was unstable, leaders in control changed frequently and this went on until 1927. The consequences of the revolution were over 2 million died, there was constant social upheaval, economic chaos, and it created a push to move to the United States.

“Immigration was easy. There was a 5 cent border tax, and that’s all it cost to enter the United States,” Delgado said. “There were only 120 border agents to police the 2,000 mile long border. With the ease of going back and forth it created a tradition. The majority came from central Mexico. People came from a certain place and went to a certain place. They didn’t just wake up and think ‘I’m going to the United States.’ It was a very personal decision and they went to select areas.

“By 1924, immigration policy changed all together. They were not bringing in many from Europe, so it escalated immigration from Mexico. They came through employment agencies. Companies sent recruiters to the border and into Mexico. The railroads already had trunk lines in Mexico and they offered jobs in specific places in the states,” Delgado said.

He showed an ad from 1922 Spanish language newspaper in Chicago and said it was second only to Los Angeles in Mexican population. Chicago is still second largest center of Mexican immigrants. He said the perception is that they are all are in the Southwest.

The ad said, “We want Mexican workers. They are hard working and honest, and they would get a boxcar, a stove and a garden plot and a railroad ticket to come to work in these areas and two free passes a year.”

In early years mostly single men came and the railroad companies recognized if they had their families they would stay longer. The belief was if you had a happy content worker they would be better workers.

“The Mexican workers were all laborers. There was no way to work your way up. By the mid 1920s maintenance-of-way was done by 100 percent Mexican laborers, called Traqueros, or track workers,” he said. “Where ever there were small towns that had maintenance-of-way, there would be a boxcar colony. You will find boxcars communities were in all the small towns along the railroad. Some may only have one or two, and some may still have wheels and be a movable camp. Also there were 12 x 12 foot housing was made out of creosote treated ties.”

Delgado had many photos from different camps and several from Galesburg’s three camps. Many in the audience recognized friends and relatives in the photos.

Sisters Mary Vega and Jessie Ponce were there and shared memories.

“My father-in-law lived in the boxcars, and they went wherever there was work,” Jessie said.

Mary remembered living in a shack near a camp. “We were little kids and we played in the camps with the kids who lived there.”

Jessie married Lupe Pereze and said he worked for the railroad about 10 years. Eventually they opened John’s Taco Hideout, on West Berrien Street. Their son Jack runs the restaurant now.

The event was sponsored by the Hispanic Latino Resource Group. Secretary Margo Davila said, “We wanted to have a community event to educate and bring about awareness of the history of generations of our past. I was intrigued by Dr. Delgado’s stories about his grandmother.”

For those interested in the local boxcar communities, Will and Luz Schick of Galesburg wrote and produced a documentary called, “Boxcar People,” that tells the story of the estimated 80 children from as many as 15 families who grew up in these boxcar communities. A DVD of the program is available thru shop.wtvp.org.

**Three Galesburg camps**

Galesburg had three boxcar communities and many of those original families have become prominent in the city. Gayla Pacheco provided a roster of those families:

**The Humps Camp:**

1. Ramirez family

2. Majorga family

3. Medina family

4. Ramiraz family

**The Santa Fe Camp:**

1. Padilla family

2. Luna family

3. Sapien family

4. Ponce family

**Davis (Street) Camp:**

1. Higareda family

2. Cabrera/Lopez families

3. Reveles family

4. Gonzalez family

5. Maciel family

6. Martinez family

7. Brown family

8. Majorgas family

9. Gonzalez family

10. Giminez family

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

1. Annotate the article (Underline, Circle vocab, Symbols, etc.)
2. During what time period did Mexican immigrants work on the railroads?
3. Why did Mexican people want to migrate to the United States? What was happening in their own country that would force them out?
4. How did immigration change in 1924? What was the process before and after this date?
5. What were Mexican immigrants provided with/promised when coming to the U.S to work?
6. Why were families more likely to be recruited?
7. What is the significance of the Taco Hideout restaurant? What does this space do for members of the Boxcar communities or Galesburg people?
8. Name the 3 different boxcar communities.