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Ethnic Transitions between Poles and Mexicans

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Why is South Bend's Polish History Relevant to Discuss?

The city of South Bend has a very diverse ethnic background. The history of this small Midwestern city chronicles both opportunity and depression, community building and segregation, development and disarray. After the first wave of immigrants arrived in the late 19th century, many groups continued to call this part of northern Indiana home. Apart from the French Holy Cross missions, which were instrumental in organizing the first communities here in Indiana, South Bend's ethnic heritage is mostly Eastern European. Hungarians, Slavs, Germans, and Irish made their way to this part of the Midwest because of economic opportunity in the manufacturing industry. The Poles were one of the first groups to arrive in South Bend, forming a prominent ethnic contingency that would become intimately interwoven with the history and culture of this industrial



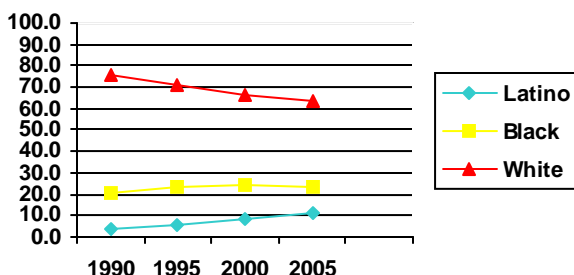
Polish Immigrants waiting in line to have their passports checked before leaving. Warsaw, Poland, 1927. Bettman/Corbis

city. The first aspect of this brief describes the origin of South Bend Polonia and the role this community played in shaping South Bend.

The composition of immigrant groups entering the United States in general and South Bend in particular has been in constant flux. While immigrants have played an instrumental role in shaping

and developing the political, social, economic and religious landscape of this country, immigration is a frequently misunderstood process. The most recent influx of residents to South Bend, the majority of whom come from Mexico, is no exception. The second goal of this brief is to chronicle and demystify the entrance of the Mexican community on the South Bend cultural stage.

The third aspect will be to explain the recent ethnic transition South Bend has experienced through a humanistic perspective. I hope to highlight this perspective by utilizing St. Adalberts parish and a central bakery on Western Avenue as my two case studies. Through my analysis, I hope to combat the ideology that the changing ethnic composition of South Bend is a problem, loss, or setback.



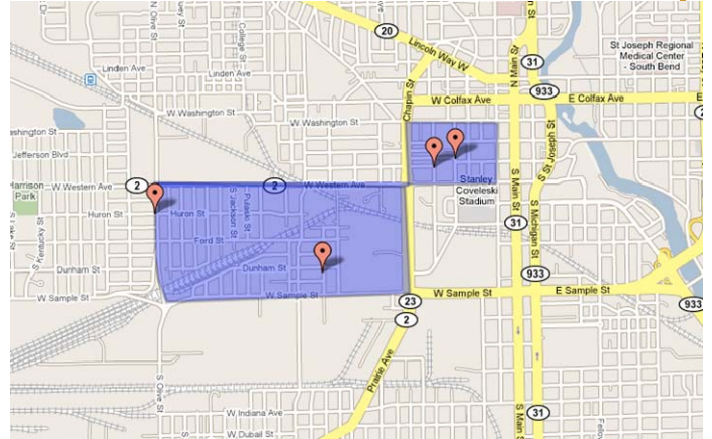
Population Change in South Bend since 1990 by Race/Ethnicity
Source: www.census.gov (courtesy Jenna Adsit)

The history of South Bend's Polonia

Poles first began to arrive in South Bend in the 1860's. Many found work on the Michigan Central Railroad being built between Chicago, LaPorte, and South Bend (3). Quoting Fr. Chrobot, Ph.D., "Poles began coming here in 1863-1854 after an unsuccessful insurrection against Russia." Some Polish laborers earned enough to purchase land and employed their countrymen when the railroad offered no work. This settlement built community identity and accelerated the growth of South Bend agriculture. The majority of the first Poles were from the capital city of Poland, **Warszawa**, and by 1910 they had established a clearly defined neighborhood called **Bogdarka** (God's gift). The name of the neighborhood is a testament to the deep devotional aspect of Polish culture. The opportunity for growth and prosperity that

South Bend provided was truly a gift from God in comparison to the oppression they experienced back in Europe. This original neighborhood (which housed approximately 21,000 Poles at the turn of the century), extends down the present Chapin Street, and is bounded by Washington to the north and Western to the south.

The social and economic pinnacle of South Bend's Polish community was reached in the mid-to late 1920's. "During the 1920's, there were twelve bakeries and over seventy grocery-butcher store combinations in these [Polish] neighborhoods. There were nineteen retail dry goods stores, twelve furniture stores, plus a lumber company and a coal yard" (Stabrowski, 46). The Z.B Falcons, a Polish-American fraternal benefit society, had their national headquarters located in South



Ethnic neighborhood "Bogdarka". Left to right are St. Patrick's, St. Hedwig's, St. Casimir, and St. Adalbert's.

Bend only a few years earlier. This society, along with the Polish National Alliance, was a popular gathering place for Poles in the earlier half of the 20th century. To this day, the Falcon's Nest has its famous fish fry the first Friday of every month. The Polish community also made themselves known in the political, economic, and professional spheres in the city.

The 1950's, although prosperous for the Polish community, showed plateaus in church membership and business development. It was becoming apparent that South Bend Polonia had reached the end of its golden age in the 1950s and was beginning to feel the effects of assimilation.



Immigrant Children singing. Detroit Michigan, 1955. John Dominis.



Polish Farmers. Paul Schutzer, June 1963 courtesy LIFE.



Poland is the 9th largest country in Europe with a population of 38 million people. The modern emigration is to England and Ireland due to the economic strength of the Euro.

South Bend's Mexican Heritage

Mexican immigration to the United States largely began during the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) when approximately 700,000 Mexicans sought refuge in the American southwest. WWI continued to attract Mexican immigrants, whose labor was needed for the elevated levels of American manufacturing. As migration spread further north, cities like Chicago and Detroit became major ethnic hubs. WWII offered further incentives for immigration through initiatives like the *bracero* program. Although this program ended in 1964 (largely due to American xenophobia), its effects upon migration were numerous, lasting, and widespread. In fact, the *bracero* program was responsible for the arrival of the first Mexican settlers to the South Bend area. "As early as 1946 some migrants from the southwest came to work on the farms of South Bend's west side" (Fotia, 5). Mexican immigration to our community increased exponentially from 1965-1971. Two large Mexican American communities were founded on South Bend's west side—one near what was

once Washington High School (now IVY Tech) and the other around St. Casimir's Church (the area bounded by Ford and Sample). Fotia states in her 1975 research work that "The Mexican-Americans are facing a problem distinct from the experience of other ethnic groups" (6). She claims that traditional processes of socialization, migrant lifestyle, and community separation have previously prevented Mexican communities from being in contact with Anglos. Moving to South Bend changed all of this.

In 1970, there were approximately 332 Spanish-speaking households in South Bend. The census estimate for 1974 is 3,086 Mexican Americans, most between the ages of 20-29 (Faight, 1975). Now, there are over 2,315 Spanish-speaking households and 11,324 Mexican Americans in South Bend (ACS, 2006). New retail stores, restaurants, and automotive service centers now grace Western avenue and Sample street and, as a result of this population boom, have economically revitalized the west side of South Bend. Manufacturing was the largest sector employing Mexicans in the early 90s, with

Hispanics occupying 3.3% of total jobs; in 2006 construction work predominated with 10.9% of total jobs (Indiana, 2007).



A map of the predominant Hispanic parishes in South Bend. Notice the overlap with the previous Polish community. Higher densities are indicative of higher populations. Adapted from Kimberly Tavare, Jenna Adsit and Emilie Prot, 2006.

The Importance of the Parish in Both Communities

The Catholic Church was instrumental in organizing the social lives of the early Polish settlers in South Bend. Schooling, social events, and gatherings were all part of were all part of the Polish parish. Ever since the ordination of the first Polish pastor, Fr. Walenty Czynewski (C.S.C.) in 1874, South Bend's Polonia has had its roots in church infrastructure. The first parish to be founded was St. Hedwig's (originally known as St. Joseph's) in 1877. After being destroyed by a tornado, the church was rebuilt at 331 Scott Street.

This larger church accommodated the influx of new Polish immigrants. The last of the Polish Parishes, St. Adalbert's, was built in 1910 and quickly became the center of South Bend Polonia's presence and pride. The church and clergy continued to play a crucial role in maintaining Polish identity, culture, and tradition: "These [numerous pastors] took it upon themselves to publicly warn their people that the influence of the pastor went beyond the parish" (Strabowski, 11).

Maria Rzeszutek, a baker at the South Bend Farmers' Market, emphasizes the centrality of the Church in the lives of the Polish residents:

"...the one thing that tied Polish people together has been the church. It was the center of organization; kids were raised in Polish tradition and culture."



“Both [Mexicans and Poles] love JPII, Mary, and have great food. There is a strong devotional aspect in both of these cultures’ faith lives.”

—Fr. Chris Cox, Pastor, St. Adalbert’s Parish

“When there is a lack of Polish church, there is a lack of Polishness.”

—Maria Rzeszutek

Rzeszutek’s comments show that even to this day, traditional Poles find the Parish to be the center of the community. This phenomenon is not limited to South Bend—it is something that I have experienced personally in my home community in Chicago, Illinois. The church in which I was baptized has a very dynamic community with astounding attendance rates by both young and old (rare in today’s secularized society). This further indicates that Poles see Catholicism and the parish as a source of identity.

Parish membership is also of utmost importance for the Hispano-American culture. Fr. Chris Cox, current the pastor of St. Adalbert’s states, “There are tremendous similarities between the Polish immigration 100 years ago and the Mexican immigration now. The Mexican community in South Bend is no exception. My experience in Tijuana, Haiti, and other marginalized Catholic communities is that the Church functions as a means of maintaining in situations of displacement. It is a means of uniting people with means that transcend ethnicity or demographics.” Rosalina, a *panaderia* owner from Durango, Mexico, came to South Bend eight years ago. She states “Us Mexicans are very religious and churchgoing. For example, yesterday was the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Many people don’t work so they can go to church.” Fr. Cox states that attendance in the parish school has increased dramatically with the arrival of the Mexicans with a strong (95% identifying) Catholicism.

Transitions in the Community



Within the St. Adalbert’s parish

In 2003, St. Stephen’s (a predominantly Hispanic and Hungarian Parish) was closed down and united with St. Adalbert’s, the largest Polish parish in South Bend. Parish consolidations have been frequent in the past years due to inadequate funding. Fr. Cox remembers this transition very clearly. In a phone interview, he recalls, “There was a lot of grieving on both sides. The Hispanics were grieving because the place where they were having their baptisms and burying their dead was now gone, and the Polish were grieving too because their parish had changed and was not the same. There was some openness and some tension to the transition on both sides.” The changes in parish communities engendered by the consolidation proved to be detrimental to both parties involved because of increased language and cultural barriers that were difficult to initially overcome.

At Panaderia Central

The transition in parish life was also mirrored in economic changes. As Poles moved away from Western Avenue in the 1960s and 1970s, they sold many of the shops and stores that helped maintain Polish identity. Two significant examples are the Panaderia on the 3000 block of Western Avenue and the Vos-Casimir’s depart-

ment store on the 2900th block. Vos-Casimir’s was a popular department store, equivalent to a modern day Krogers, and closed in 1963 (the same year as Studebaker’s). Panaderia Central was originally called *Progresive* bakery and was owned by Polish people for about 23 years. It was sold to a Mexican family in 1999. The fact that this bakery changed from Polish to Mexican ownership attests to the shifting demographics for South Bend Poles and attests to the rising economic prosperity and development within the Hispanic community on the west side.



Discussion



Kolacz Brothers Bakery, located on the 2700th block of Western, currently up for sale. Despite the fact that this building has been abandoned for many years, it still serves to remind people of the rich Polish culture once present in South Bend.

I propose two mechanisms contributing to the decline of the Polish community in South Bend. First, economic prosperity during the few “golden years” immediately following WWII created the means for Poles to climb socioeconomic ladders and move into more expensive parts of St. Joseph’s county. The economy was prospering, and as a result of the financial benefits, many new Polish-American families left for the suburbs. Maria Rzeszutek notes that “The old Polonia lives where it always has lived. The new Polonia lives in Mishawaka, Grainger, Elkhart.” During this period, younger families moved out of the community to newer areas of the county. Within the next generation, the very life blood of the ethnic community would disappear and in its place would be a much older and a very different population base (Strabowski, 72).

The second explanation is that the economic downturn in the manufacturing industry made South Bend a much less prosperous community—creating yet another impetus for the Poles to leave. Unfortunately, South Bend’s agriculture and manufacturing industries could not compete with the advent of globalization and larger markets. The end of the WWII sig-

naled the move of many large corporations out of the area, with Studebaker the last to leave in 1967. The prominence of the Polish community initially seems to correlate with the decline of the manufacturing industry in South Bend. Companies like Singer sewing machines, Bendix Aviation Company, Oliver plows, and Studebaker automotive corporation were just a few of the companies employing Poles during and shortly after the war. In 1960, Studebakers employed approximately 10,000, with Oliver Plow and Bendix 4,000 each. Most, if not all of these companies left by the early 1960s (Chrobot, 2008). The decline in the Polish community was accompanied by a clear change in cultural ideals. As the Polish community became assimilated, it lost elements of its heritage and tradition that were crucial for maintaining identity. This facilitated the fragmentation of the Polish community and eventually led to its dissolution. Maria Rzeszutek notes the shift in South Bend: “I can say that everything is easier in terms of material things, but there is a lack of what is valued in Poland because here there is very little time. There is not enough time devoted to family. Because it is not enough that only one person works.

Here there are many cultures, many backgrounds, and I think that this combined, is something to set yourself against. Because often Poles forget what they left with and instead of enriching their culture, they are embarrassed of their [heritage]. Often we associate being Polish with golomki, pierogi, and sausage. They are not valued for their intellect and their contributions to history are overlooked. This is very sad.”

The purpose of my study was to examine the ethnic transition South Bend underwent and in assessing this change, I hope to have demonstrated that ethnic flows are not abnormal processes. This study adds a new chapter to Julie Leninger’s pioneering collection of oral histories of the Mexican-American immigrants who arrived in South Bend in the post-war period. Leninger’s aims for her sensitive investigation apply equally to my work: “Hopefully, by reading these life histories, agency personnel, educators, and other professionals will gain a deeper understanding of Mexican Americans’ roots and ambitions, for here Chicanos serve as resource people, not part of a “problem” to be solved” (9).

Discussion cont. | References

Although the fragmentation and dissolution of ethnic communities is unfortunate, it creates the opportunity for cultural diversification. In South Bend, the transition provided the opportunity for a fresh, young, and dynamic ethnic minority to become incorporated into the community. It proved to be beneficial for the Parish, raising attendance rates and school enrollment rates. These fluctuations are one of the most important diversifying mechanisms in American cities. Ethnic transitions can be peaceful and provide a mechanism for forming valuable intercultural relationships. In Julie Leiniger's historical narratives regarding Chicano Heritage in South Bend, Eneldia Martinez states, "Like the first time we came here we met a Polish family, Mrs. Petrosky. They were just great people and we never had any problems with them."



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Materials and Methods

In order to explore the experience of ethnic transitions in South Bend, I focused my study on changes in the local Catholic parish and family-owned food businesses. I felt these locations would provide great insight because religion and food serve as symbols of identity for many cultures. Personal interviews were conducted at Panaderia Central, St. Hedwig's Parish, Rosales Market, the University of Notre Dame, the South Bend Farmers' Market, and the "Palateria La Rosita". A phone interview was conducted with Fr. Chris Cox from St. Adalbert's parish and with Maria Rzeszutek Sr. at home. There was no standardized questionnaire used in this study. Media was obtained from *LIFE* photography archives, Getty images or from personal pieces. Statistics were taken from primary literature including Indiana state estimates, government census information, and archives from the Institute of Latino Studies.

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