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September 7, 2004
Updated October 2010

A Brief History of Latinas in Denver

By
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For almost 150 years, Hispanic people have lived in Colorado. For almost 100 years, some Hispanic people have lived in Denver. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 caused many people to immigrate north. So why do we know so little of their history? It is difficult to name a Latina who lived in Denver prior to the 1940s.

In the 1930s, about 2% of Denver's population was of Hispanic origin. By the 1940s, that figure doubled to 4%. Labor shortages during World War II attracted workers, including Hispanics, both from rural Colorado as well as from Mexico.



Casa Mayan, 1950. Latino owned restaurant in Auraria

Early Spanish speaking residents lived in West Denver, near the Platte River. Auraria neighborhood, where Auraria Higher Education Complex stands today, was home for many Hispanic people from 1916 until 1970.* St. Cajetan's church served the Spanish speaking community beginning in 1926. Later, in 1936, Our Lady of Guadalupe began, with a focus on the Latino population. Today, many Latinos live in West Denver, Southwest Denver, and North Denver. Northeast Denver has seen a sizable increase in Latino population. According to the U.S. Census, 32.5% of women living in Denver in 2000 were Latinas.

Representative Betty Benevidez represented West Denver from 1970-1974 as the first Latina in the Colorado legislature. Senator Polly Baca was the first Latina State senator, serving from 1978 until 1986. Nieves Perez McIntire served on Denver City Council from 1983-1987. She was co-sponsor of the ordinance creating the Denver Women's Commission. She was the first Latina City Councilwoman. Ramona Martinez and Debbie Ortega followed her; they each served 16 years, from 1987 -- 2003. Ramona was the first Latina to serve as City Council President (in 1991). Mayor Federico Peña named Martha Guevara Director of Parks and Recreation in 1983. She was the first Latina to serve as a member of the Mayor's cabinet. In 2010, Governor Bill Ritter appointed Monica Marquez to the Colorado Supreme Court, the first Latina Colorado Supreme Court justice.

Denver has many programs designed to help Latinas. A group of Latinos began LARASA

(Latin American Research and Service Agency) in 1964. Latinas Lena Archuleta, Betty Salazar and Helen Lucero were among them. It was the first Latino oriented program nationally to receive United Way funding. Latinas started MiCasa Center for Women in 1976, based on an idea from a group of head start mothers.

MiCasa is unique in that Latinas have and continue to lead the organization and the agency offers services with an eye for Latin culture. One past director of MiCasa--Juana Bordas -- began the National Hispana Leadership Institute, which develops Latina leaders on a national level. In 2001, she started the Circle of Latina Leadership, which is developing the next generation of Latina leaders in Colorado. In 2007, she published a guide to multicultural leadership: *Salsa, Soul and Spirit*.

Sister Alicia Cuaron began *Adelante Mujer* conferences in the mid-1980s, focusing on personal and professional development for Latinas. After a career in business and economic development, she founded Centro Bienestar, a multiservice center for the Spanish speaking population. Now Bienestar Family Services, it is part of Centro San



Monica Marquez, first Latina Justice on the Colorado Supreme Court

Juan Diego of the Catholic Church. It provides education and counseling services for the Spanish speaking population, as well as support for Latina professionals relocating from Latin America.

Other newer non-profits include Latina Initiative (2002) to promote civic engagement by Latinas, including voter registration, education and turnout, citizenship classes, and other civic involvement. COLOR, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (1998) focuses on Latina Health and Reproductive Justice. The Latina Chamber of Commerce started in 2005.



Lena Archuleta.

Read her bio at

www.cogreatwomen.org

Lena Archuleta was the first Latina principal in Denver Public Schools in the 1970s. She went on to serve on the National Board of AARP. Christine Johnson, former President of Community College of Denver, was the first Latina president of a Colorado college or university. Approximately 32% of CCD's students are Latino or Latina. Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzales began la Escuela Tlateloco in 1970. Nita Gonzales, his daughter, has run the private school for 20 years. The school teaches cultural pride along with other classes for students in grades 1-12. Martha Urioste brought the Montessori method to public schools with Mitchell Montessori.

In business, no one is as famous as Linda Alvarado, owner of Alvarado Construction Company. She began the company with a \$2,500 loan from her parents. Now she is owner of the largest construction company owned by a Latina. She was one of the primary contractors for building the Bronco Stadium, Denver International Airport, and the Colorado Convention Center. Also she is the only Latina part-owner of a major league baseball team--the Colorado Rockies.

Ann Padilla is the owner of Sunnyside Temps, which she established in 1975. It is one of the largest and oldest private businesses for temporary employment in Colorado. Wanda Padilla started LaVoz bilingual newspaper in her kitchen in 1974. She worked there continually until she sold it in 2008. Beverly Martinez hosted "Denver Now"--a talk show-- in the 1970s and remains with Channel 2 as their Public Affairs Manager. Florence Hernandez-Ramos was president and CEO of KUVU 89.3 FM for twenty years. She was a founder in 1985 of the public radio station which features Jazz and has served as a training ground for many Latinos and African-Americans want to gain a foothold in media.

**In the arts, Carlota Espinoza is an artist well known for her murals. They appeared in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (1977) and in a branch of the Denver Public Library. Another early Chicana artist was storyteller Jerry Lawson who also ran a gallery *Artes del Pueblo*, while holding down a day job as a clinic administrator for Denver Health.

The only Colorado Latina in the National Women's Hall of Fame is Linda Alvarado. Latinas in the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame are:

- Linda Alvarado - builder
- Lena Archuleta – school principal
- Polly Baca – state senator
- Juana Bordas – leadership consultant
- Martha Urioste -- educator
- Eppie Archuleta – weaver from Southern Colorado
- Sister Alicia Cuaron – community leader
- Ramona Martinez – Political Leader
- Maria Guajardo, PhD - Educator

Most Latinas have contributed to their communities, their churches, and their families without fame. They have worked, raised their children, and provided care to their families. All of these contributions are important.

Leadership is difficult. Those who take the challenge and make the most of it inspire the next generation to set their goals high and achieve them.

*See *Auraria Remembered*. Magdalena Gallegos, Ed. Community College of Denver, 1991.

**See *Chicano Art in Denver: An Overview*. George Rivera, Professor of Fine Arts. University of Colorado -- Boulder.
<http://latinoartcommunity.org/community/EducationalRes/vistas/rivera-ChicArtinCO.html>