

Old Photo Album

Celebrating Western New York's Hispanic Heritage

By Tamara Alsace

All Images Courtesy the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York unless otherwise noted.

Hispanics have always been part of our shared Western New York heritage. Initially hailing from Spain and Mexico, the community has grown to include Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans and many more from Central America and beyond. Like other groups who settled here, there has been a long history of mutual support and the sharing of common resources to lift and enrich people. Communities often organized *la sociedad de socorros mutuos* (a mutual aid society) focused on meeting the basic needs of their members. One of the first clubs to be formed was the Spanish American Welfare Association in Lackawanna in 1924. The primary purpose was to pool the financial, social, cultural and civic resources of the community. Two decades later, in the 1940s, the Mexican American community established the *Junta Patriótica Mexicana* (Mexican Patriotic Board), which later became the Mexican Social Club.

When Puerto Ricans began to arrive in the 1950s, they first availed themselves of the support of the existing organizations. As they grew in numbers, however, they saw the need to create their own resources. Consequently, the *Sociedad Puertorriqueña de Ayuda Mutua* (Puerto Rican Mutual Aid Society) was founded in the 1950s. Puerto Ricans then began to settle in the area around Myrtle Avenue in Buffalo, which soon became the home of the *Centro Social Puertorriqueño* (Puerto Rican Social Center) of the Puerto Rican American Community Association – now the Olivencia Community Center.

Today, Buffalo's West Side plays host to many other organizations, businesses and events that have sprung up to meet the growing and changing needs of the community. From restaurants to parades, grease poles to theaters, museums and of course the long-standing mutual aid societies, all seek to preserve, share and promote the rich cultural resources of the Hispanic and Latin American diaspora who have added to the melting pot of Western New York. We hope you will enjoy this special edition of the Old Photo Album, celebrating Western New York's Hispanic heritage, past and present.



El Vejigante by William Rodriguez. A demon from Spanish folklore, the *vejigante* is a common element of the Puerto Rican Carnival. During festivals, participants don flowing costumes and distinctive mask, called a *careta*. Artist William Rodriguez is a founding member of *Los Artistas del Barrio Buffalo* (*The Artists of the Buffalo Neighborhood*), an arts collaborative that highlights the talents of Latino/a/x Hispanic artists of every genre in Buffalo and WNY.



This Spanish American Welfare Association float took part in the parade commemorating the City of Lackawanna's 50th anniversary in 1959. The float featured *toreadors* (bull fighters), a bull, and several *señoritas* (young ladies) to cheer them on.



This pin was given to members of the Spanish [American] Welfare Association, founded in Lackawanna in 1924 as a mutual aid society. Members who were ill or incapacitated would receive a weekly stipend from the association to help the family through times of need.



Las Compañeras (The Companions) ca. 1945, were the wives and sweethearts of the Spanish American Welfare Association members. They coordinated, planned and carried out most of the social, cultural and civic activities of the club.

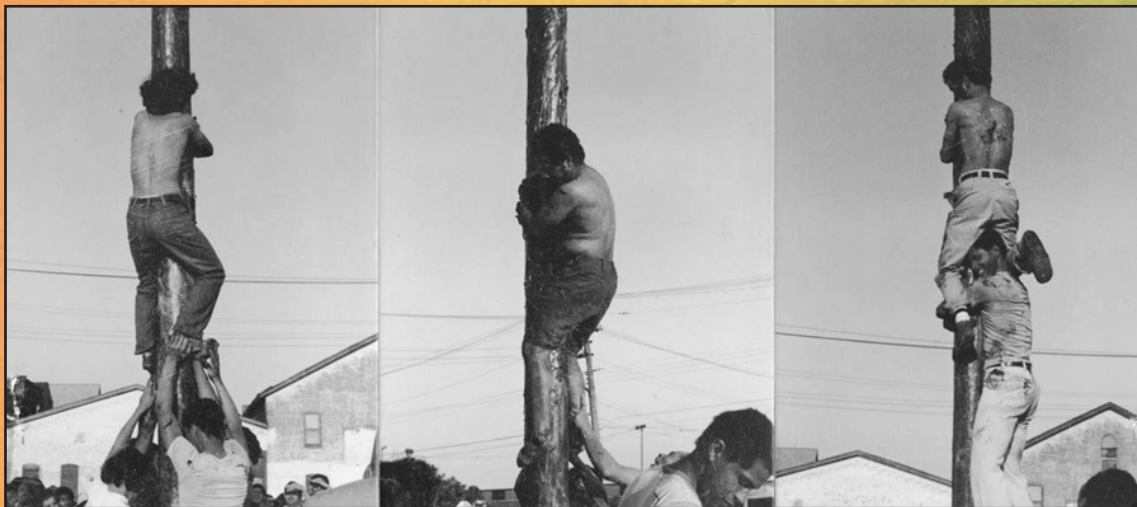
Members of Lackawanna's *Centro Social Mexicano* (Mexican Social Center) break ground for their new building in 1947. The club sponsored social events and celebrated Mexican national holidays and was a bustling home base for the community.



A performance of Mexican dance heritage during a pageant, ca. 1955, typical of the *Centro Social Mexicano*.

The *Hermanos Rodríguez Trio* – Jorge, Yolanda and José – entertained at many family and community gatherings in the 1950s and 1960s with their authentic music from Puerto Rico.





The Grease Pole Festival, held annually at the Olivencia Community Center at 261 Swan Street, started in 1969 and is the oldest continuously running festival in Buffalo. Teams from across WNY compete to reach the top of a heavily greased telephone pole and claim a monetary prize. The center is still active today, hosting numerous community and private social and cultural events.



The Puerto Rican Tigers were the 1962 "Class A" All-Star championship team of the Buffalo Municipal (MUNY) League, led by coaches Pedro Juan Herrera and George Guadalupe.



Radio personalities Rafael Acosta, Juan Texidor, María Martínez and Luis Marchany hosted the *Ecos Borincanos* (Puerto Rican Echoes) radio show Sundays on WJL 1440AM. The program was a cultural lifeline for many and an introduction to Hispanic music for others throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.



Hispanos Unidos de Buffalo (Buffalo United Hispanics), providing a wide range of human services, was founded in 1980 upon the merger of three Latino-serving organizations: the Puerto Rican American Community Association (PRACA); the Puerto Rican Chicano Committee (PRCC) and la Alternativa (LA – The Alternative), in order to provide a cohesive, unified approach to supporting members of the community. The original building, built on the corner of Virginia and 10th streets in 1869, served as home to the First Free Methodist Church congregation until 1921 and may have been used as a gymnasium in the following years.



Today, Hispanos Unidos de Buffalo has expanded into a more recently constructed building next door to the 1869 structure.



Founded over 40 years ago, the Hispanic Women's League works to empower, advocate, mentor and support Latina women and all women in the community. Their primary commitment is to provide scholarships to women of Hispanic descent for the attainment of higher education. It also contributes to numerous community services, fundraising efforts and activities to address the unique concerns of Hispanic women and the Latino community. These photos show members of the league in the 1980s and today.

COURTESY HISPANIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE



El Batey is an organization that provides percussion and dance lessons to people of all ages, instilling pride and preserving some of the most inspiring aspects of Puerto Rican/Latino/a/x cultural heritage. Its expressed mission is to celebrate, inspire and connect kids to their culture and each other, so that together they can reimagine their future.

COURTESY *EL BATEY* PUERTO RICAN CENTER



This *garita del morro* is a feature of Spanish colonial architecture. Two *garitas* like this one have been installed on *Avenida San Juan* (*San Juan Avenue*) and display the flags of all the Hispanic countries and panels depicting the rich history of Hispanics in Western New York. They were designed and installed through the efforts of the Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY, Inc. and funded through the generosity of the First Niagara Foundation.

[Ed. Note: We couldn't help but notice that the font used for the word "Heritage" at the top of the *Garita* bears a striking resemblance to that used by a certain magazine we know and love.]



Musicians and colorful dancers from *El Batey* take part in the annual Puerto Rican and Hispanic Day parade down the *Avenida San Juan* in 2019.

COURTESY *EL BATEY* PUERTO RICAN CENTER