

Mexicans Playing Baseball in Indiana Harbor, 1925-1942

JOHN FRAIRE

A few years ago, when my mother was still alive and I lived in the Midwest, I would regularly visit her in Crown Point, Indiana, where she then lived with my brother Ed and his family. On one of my visits, I traveled to a Chicago city park to watch two of my nephews play baseball. At the time, one was six years old and playing on a “tee-ball” team of six-to-eight-year-olds; no score was kept and every player got a chance to bat in each inning. The other nephew was a ten-year-old who played in the “10-and-11-year-old league.” His team played an actual six-inning game according to established baseball rules (three outs per team, three strikes and you’re out, four balls lead to a walk, etc.). Although I enjoyed watching my nephews play, and was impressed that their father was so involved with their interest in baseball, I was also struck by how poorly my nephews and their teammates played. Only two of the ten- and eleven-year-old ball players hit the ball into the

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John Fraire with his Little League team, 1964.

Courtesy of the author

outfield. There were no home runs, no hard-hit line drives, nothing that I would describe as a good defensive play—not even a smooth pickup and throw to first base on a routine ground ball. Later that day, I spoke with my oldest brother, Gabriel—an accomplished high school and college athlete. I told Gabriel that, while perhaps I was just a typical middle-aged man viewing his youth through rose-colored glasses, I thought we had played much better baseball when we were kids growing up in Gary, Indiana. As a six-year-old, I did not play tee ball. I played real baseball. True, we played in the “farm” league of the local Little League, and we practiced and played only on Saturday mornings, but we faced real pitching—sometimes another eight-year-old, but usually one of the coaches (most often, my father, who

coached throughout my and my siblings' years of organized youth baseball). Later, playing in the division for boys ages nine through twelve, I remember playing a fairly sophisticated game of baseball. We followed signs from our coaches letting us know when we should steal a base or lay down a bunt. We even occasionally pulled off a double play (usually a caught line drive where we doubled off a base runner) or hit a home run over the fence 190 feet away. Even on defense, we had set plays such as an outfield shift for left-handed batters against one certain team.

Gabriel responded that, as children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, all we did was play baseball. It was an integral part of our lives, part of our identity. Living in Gary, with its many baseball parks, open areas, and opportunities to play ball, it was only natural that we had played better baseball than today's kids. He was right. My brothers and I first played in the Manbridge Little League; when our family moved to another part of Gary, we joined the Elks Little League. We had real dugouts, fences in the outfields, concession stands for the people attending the games, and we held regular practices—unlike my nephews, who play in a park district with no fences, no concession stands, and certainly no outfield shifts for left-handed hitters, we were raised playing baseball.

Yet, I wonder if my memories differed much from those of my parents and their generation. As children we heard stories about their baseball-playing prowess in East Chicago's Indiana Harbor district. At the heart of those stories were tales of the famous local boys' baseball team, the Gallos, and its sister club, a softball team, known as the Gallinas.

My mother was one of the original Gallinas and was, according to their stories, a real tomboy and excellent athlete. Looking back through the pages of a local newspaper, I found that she was one of the first Mexican girls in Indiana Harbor to play varsity sports at the local high school, East Chicago Washington High School.¹ In one chapter of their history of Indiana Harbor's Mexican community, a group of elderly Mexican women who called themselves the Señoras of Yesteryear focused on sports—and in particular on baseball—as a central element of community life in East Chicago in the mid-1900s. These local historians spared no superlatives in their account of the Gallos:

The Gallos were a unique, outstanding, versatile team. Every Sunday was a special event when the Gallos played and the "Colonia Mexicana" was there to morally support them. Hundreds of

¹Calumet News, May 28, 1941.

men and women and entire families followed them. Picnics were organized on the fields and some carried their own folding chairs. Their greatest pleasure was for the crowd to yell smart, provoking remarks of criticism to the opposite team. The joy was expressed with applause and laughter from the audience. The crowd would chant wild calls for a special player. The team was the crowd's pleasers for they put on an unbelievable performance, playing with their entire body, heart and soul . . . The Gallos will never be forgotten, and those who were present at the games remember them with Mexican pride.²

As I thought about the Gallos, Gallinas, and the world of baseball in Indiana Harbor from the late 1920s through the early 1940s, I wondered if my parents and their generation had watched us—my brother Gabriel, me, and our generation—play baseball as kids, thinking we were not as good as they had been. Did they think we did not know how to turn a double play? Execute the hit and run? Know how to run the base paths? After all, since their arrival in the community, long before the birth of my generation, they had been playing baseball. For many years, there were Mexicans playing baseball in Indiana Harbor.

THE HARBOR

In the period from 1925 to 1942, local baseball teams played a key role in helping the Mexican community of Indiana Harbor to develop both its *Mexicanidad* (Mexican identity) and its U.S./American identity. Rather than facing the choice of becoming either more U.S./American or less Mexican, members of this ethnic community could and did develop both identities (and many more). In the act of playing organized baseball, they made visible their multiple cultural allegiances and practices.

Many ethnic groups lived in Indiana Harbor during the interwar period, but for the Mexican community of Northwest Indiana, “The Harbor”—as Indiana Harbor is known locally to most Mexicans who were raised in the area—was the center of their community. One of the most highly industrialized areas in the world, Indiana Harbor housed among its many factories some of the nation’s largest steel mills: U.S. Steel,

²Señoras of Yesteryear, *Mexican American Harbor Lights: Pictorial History* (Indiana Harbor, Ind., 1992), 77.



The author, front, with brothers Rock (l.) and Gabriel and father Gabriel, 1960, at their house on Taney Place, Gary, Indiana.

Courtesy of the author

Youngstown, Bethlehem, and the world's largest plant at the time, Inland Steel. As Detroit is associated with automobile production and West Virginia with coal mining, Indiana Harbor's historical reputation (like that of Northwest Indiana more generally) is strongly intertwined with the steel industry, especially Inland Steel.

Many of the members of Indiana Harbor's Mexican community lived within a small area just off the shore of Lake Michigan, stretching west from the numerous railroad tracks that ran beside the Inland Steel plant to Block and Pennsylvania (or as local residents called it, "Pennsy") Avenues. The rest of Indiana Harbor lay to the south, on the other side of the railroad tracks. While outsiders considered the area the worst part of town, those who lived there—especially Mexicans—knew it as a vibrant, multi-ethnic area.

Indiana Harbor technically lies within the city of East Chicago, although the two communities often operated as separate cities through much of the early twentieth century. During that period they remained, in the words of local historian and journalist Archibald M. McKinlay, a set of "unidentical twins" who "developed physically and psychologically apart, separated by a ship canal, a lack of easy communication, and different blood lines."³

The few surviving members of the Mexican community of Indiana Harbor from the interwar period, most of them now well into their eighties and early nineties, are among the oldest living members of the Mexican community in Northwest Indiana. Most were born in Indiana Harbor in the mid-1920s; others came to the area directly from Mexico at a very young age. Today, these early residents meet monthly for lunch, calling themselves the "Old Timers of Indiana Harbor." They continue to organize fundraisers and support other community efforts. As a generation, these Old Timers lived through the Great Depression and stayed in the Midwest at a time when thousands of other Mexicans returned, both voluntarily and forcibly, to Mexico. They survived periods of repatriation and intense discrimination, witnessed and participated in unionization drives and steel strikes in the 1940s and 1950s, served with distinction and honor in World War II and Korea, endured the McCarthy Red Scares and "Americanization" drives initiated by the more racist segments of the region's residents, and spent their entire working lives as steelworkers or as workers in other basic industries.

³Archibald M. McKinlay, *Twin City: A Pictorial History of East Chicago, Indiana* (Norfolk, Va., 1988), 12.

They also loved baseball, in particular *Los Gallos*, a boys' baseball team, and *Las Gallinas*, a girls' softball team. In the late 1930s and 1940s, both teams played against other teams in Indiana Harbor, Gary, Whiting, and Hammond, Indiana; and in South Chicago. Although neither the *Gallinas* nor the *Gallos* ever won any championships—at least not according to any documented reports—they have earned a small but respected spot in the Mexican folklore of the community. For Indiana Harbor's Mexican residents, baseball played a small but significant role in the process of joining the industrial working class while forging a new understanding of what it meant to be Mexican American/Chicano.

Existing research in Midwest Chicano history reveals little about what the formation of Mexican baseball and softball teams signified for the community in the interwar years. Except for some references by Ciro H. Sepúlveda in his study of the social life in Indiana Harbor in the period, baseball receives little attention in major historical works such as James B. Lane and Edward J. Escobar's otherwise extensive and helpful collection of articles about Latinos in Northwest Indiana. And, with the exception of recent work by Michael Innis-Jiménez and Richard Santillán, Mexican American or Chicano history remains absent, as well, from midwestern sports history.⁴

BASEBALL'S FIRST WAVE, 1922-1930

Interwar baseball in Indiana Harbor's Mexican community is best documented during two brief periods: from 1927 to 1929, and from the late 1930s until the start of World War II. The mid-1920s were prosperous years for Indiana Harbor, as Inland Steel began a five-year expansion project and actively recruited more workers.⁵ Included in that recruitment were my grandparents, Victor and Aurelia Guerrero, who arrived in the city in 1921 after leaving Texas and working briefly picking beets in Iowa. While the National Origins Act of 1924 had placed strict restric-

⁴Ciro H. Sepúlveda, "Social Life and Nativism in La Colonia Del Harbor," in *Forging a Community: The Latino Experience in Northwest Indiana, 1919-1975*, eds. James B. Lane and Edward J. Escobar (Chicago, 1987), 80-94; Michael Innis-Jiménez, "Beyond the Baseball Diamond and Basketball Court: Organized Leisure in Inter-war Mexican South Chicago," in *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 issue 7 (2009), 906-23; Richard Santillán, "Mexican Baseball Teams in the Midwest, 1916-1965: The Politics of Cultural Survival and Civil Rights," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies* 8 (2001), 131-51.

⁵Francisco A. Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Chicano Steel Workers and Unionism in the Midwest, 1919-1945," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 6 (Summer 1975), 267-69.

tions on immigration from Europe, it included no such limits on arrivals from Mexico. During this wave of Mexican migration to the Midwest, immigration from the South and Southwest, as well as from Mexico, increased dramatically. It continued until the start of the Great Depression, when a campaign of forced and voluntary repatriation sent many Mexican residents of the region back to their home country.⁶

The period from 1938 to the onset of World War II likewise saw improving economic conditions, as well as a renewed stability and permanence in the Mexican community in Indiana Harbor. Most importantly, during this later period the children of those early residents who had arrived in the late 1910s and early 1920s were becoming teenagers and young adults. They had lived all or most of their lives in the United States and were immersed in many aspects of U.S. popular culture, including its dance, music, and movies; although bilingual, many spoke English better than they did Spanish. By the start of the war, at least a dozen—and probably more—organized Mexican baseball and softball teams (both men's and women's) were playing in Indiana Harbor and other communities across Northwest Indiana and South Chicago. These teams played against each other and against teams from other ethnic and racial communities in East Chicago, Hammond, Gary, South Chicago, and elsewhere in Illinois and Indiana.

The best-known of the Mexican baseball teams playing in Northwest Indiana Harbor in the mid-1920s included *El Club Azteca*, *Zacatecas*, *La Junta*, *Club Juvenil*, *La Garra*, *El Club Deportivo International*, *Las Aguilas* (originally known as the *Atletas Mexican Baseball Team*), and *Los Obreros*. Fred Maravilla, who would later serve as the first coach of *Las Gallinas*, recalled the members of *El Club Azteca* as young men in their twenties and thirties who “were good enough to play against the semi-professional teams.” Martin Vega, who played for the *Juvenils* in 1928 when he was just 13 years old, remembers that the club played the Negro League Kansas City Monarchs in the late 1930s. “Satchel Paige pitched against us,” he said, “and I think the only one who got a hit was Leo Hernandez.” In addition to Hernandez, Vega could still name most of the *Juvenils*' lineup when I spoke with him in 2002:

⁶Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten, “Discrimination and Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary,” in *Forging A Community*, eds. Lane and Escobar, 161-86.

We had three Perez brothers, Rudy, Richard and Felix; and two Mendozas, Manuel and John. One played third and the other pitched. We also had a first baseman, Nacho Valencia. . . Second baseman was Richard Perez, shortstop, me, Martin. In left field was Felix Perez and center field was Benny Ortega, when he wasn't pitching. Right field was Angel Machuca. The pitcher was Juan Mendoza and the catcher was Joe Romero. We used to call him "white" because he was so dark.⁷

Vega also recalled another *Juvenil* player nicknamed "Sissy": "He was the one that brought the equipment, and if he didn't play, he would take it away." Fortunately for the *Juvenils*, continued Martin, Sissy "was a good, good ball player."⁸

While Indiana Harbor's Mexican community was growing, it remained small enough to include many connections among the players. Brothers Joe and Peter Sosa played together on the *Juvenils*; years later their younger brother would play for the *Gallos*. Felix and Rudy Perez, as well as Angel Machuca and Benny Ortega, would also go on to play for the *Gallos*. Most of the members of each team's lineup lived in Indiana Harbor, and many would stay there for their whole lives; Vega himself worked at Inland Steel for forty years. His children all attended college, and one of his daughters is the superintendent of schools in nearby Whiting.

Players distinguished themselves off as well as on the field. *Juvenil* player John Segovia, who went on to earn his B.S. and law degrees from Indiana University, would develop a successful career as a lawyer in the area, becoming one of what the Señoras of Yesteryear called one of the community's "Outstanding and Distinguished Citizens."⁹ Indiana Harbor resident Val Martinez, who would eventually earn a college degree and gain recognition as a local writer and poet, credits Segovia with helping him to get his first teaching job after the war, at a time when the school district refused to hire him and a handful of other Mexicans with college degrees: "It took John Segovia, the town lawyer, to give us our first break."¹⁰

⁷*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77; author interview with Fred Maravilla, November 2, 2002; author interview with Martin Vega, November 12, 2002.

⁸Author interview with Martin Vega, November 12, 2002.

⁹*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 101.

¹⁰Author interview with Valentin Martinez, November 12, 2005.

Val Martinez was not the only person who benefited from John Segovia's assistance. When Juanita Sanchez was distraught that she could not afford books to attend high school, her mother took her to see her *comadre*, Dolores Lopez, who then took her to see John Segovia's mother. Juanita and her mother met with Segovia, who at the time was home on break from Indiana University. Juanita recalls Segovia's mother saying to her son,

"This is my comadre's daughter. She wants to go to school, finish her school, but, my comadre said she cannot afford to buy the books. Is there some way that the school could loan her the books so she could continue her education?" John said, "Yes," and that he'd "look into it, no problem." So to this day I'm grateful to that woman, Dolores Lopez (Doña Lopez) and to John Segovia; because of them I was able to graduate from high school. The last two years the school loaned me the books.¹¹

Support extended in both directions. Vega remembers that the *Juvenils* received "donations from the [local] merchants" and other support from their community. The *Señoras of Yesteryear* write that teams also collected money at the games: "Mama Cuca's husband, Amado Sanchez, was the official money collector who passed the hat around."¹²

The *Calumet News* had recorded "active steps toward the organization of an East Chicago Industrial baseball league" as early as 1925. By the early 1930s, the Industrial Leagues would involve many of the area's plants and companies. Other Mexican teams at this time were affiliated with the Catholic Church, which built its first church in the community, Our Lady of Guadalupe (OLG), in 1927.¹³ Still others emerged from the several Mexican *sociedades mutualistas* (mutual aid societies) that existed in Northwest Indiana at that time. These societies, organized to help other Mexicans survive once they arrived in Indiana Harbor, provided shelter, food and, when possible, a connection for a job at Inland Steel or one of

¹¹Author interview with Juanita Sanchez, October 19, 2003.

¹²Author interview with Martin Vega, November 12, 2002; *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77.

¹³*Calumet News*, May 5, 1925.

¹⁴For an extensive review of the *sociedades mutualistas*, see Eva Mendieta, "Celebrating Mexican Culture and Lending a Helping Hand: Indiana Harbor's *Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez*, 1924-1957," *Indiana Magazine of History* 108 (December 2012), 311-44.

the other mills or factories. They also helped to organize social events, usually around Mexican Independence Day and other Mexican national celebrations. One in particular, *El Circulo de Obreros Católicos San José*, formed in 1925 by visiting priest José P. Munoz, set out to help its members and community through the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, primarily by supporting recreational activities—including baseball.¹⁴

As Munoz's role in its founding suggests, *Los Obreros* was connected directly to the Catholic Church. Having previously helped to establish a church in Kansas City's growing Mexican community, Munoz had received an invitation to Indiana Harbor from Rev. Octavius Zavata, a Spanish-speaking Italian priest who had, since 1915, conducted a Spanish-language mass in the basement of St. Demetrius Romanian Catholic Church, at 138th and Butternut Streets in Indiana Harbor—on the other side of the Pennsylvania railroad tracks but very near to the Mexican *colonia*. In 1927, after two years of fundraising, *Los Obreros* began building the OLG Church at 3855 Pennsylvania Avenue, in the heart of Indiana Harbor's Mexican community. They used materials donated from Inland Steel, Youngstown Steel, and Atlas Cement, and volunteer labor provided by society members. The church's opening ceremony, on January 30, 1927, included poetry, plays, and music provided by the *Cuadro Dramatico*, a cultural component to *Los Obreros*.¹⁵

Despite the group's formal establishment in 1925, some evidence suggests the existence of a *Los Obreros*-sponsored baseball team as early as 1922. *El Amigo de Hogar*, a Spanish-language newspaper published by the society from 1925 until 1930, first reports on a *Los Obreros* team in 1927.¹⁶ Based on his study of the newspaper's coverage, Sepúlveda writes that baseball "became one of the major forms of recreation during the spring and summer months" in Indiana Harbor, and that "Sunday[s] became baseball days." As the Señoras of Yesteryear recall of these early baseball games, "the environment was a happy one, and the people looked forward to Sunday afternoons. All the teams had attractive uniforms, and the players wore them proudly." Sepúlveda notes that a "once abandoned field" on Block Avenue "was converted into *El Parque Anahuac*." For two years, 1927 and 1928, *El Amigo de Hogar* prominently promoted and re-

¹³Juan García and Angel Cal, "El Circulo de Obreros Católicos San José, 1925-1930," in *Forging a Community*, eds. Lane and Escobar, 99-100; *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 36. A fire destroyed the original OLG church building in 1939, but within a year, a new building was constructed ten blocks from the original site on the 3500 block of Deodar Street.

¹⁶*El Amigo de Hogar*, July 24, 1927; *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77.

ported on “baseball” or “*basebolero*,” as it was interchangeably called. The newspaper’s reports, which sometimes ranged up to two or three columns in length, appeared on the front page and detailed games between *Los Obreros* and other Mexican teams such as *Las Aguilas Mexicanas* (Mexican Eagles), *Club Azteca*, a team from Chicago, and the Gary-based *Club Deportiva Mexico* (Mexican Sport Club). As the paper proudly noted, East Chicago mayor R. P. Hale threw out the first ball of one such game. Also reported were games between *Los Obreros* and non-Mexican teams such as America’s Nationals (8/27/27) of East Chicago, the Whiting (Indiana) Greys (6/29/29), and the P & A Hoosiers of Joliet, Illinois (8/11/1929). No particular team dominated the play, according to box results printed in *El Amigo de Hogar*.¹⁷

Games played during this first period of Mexican baseball in Indiana Harbor took place at various locations. The first site used by Mexican residents for a baseball park appears to have been either at 142nd and Euclid—a few blocks from the heart of the Mexican community on Block Avenue but still in Indiana Harbor—or at Washington Park, two blocks east at 142nd and Parrish. Other games were played east of Field Elementary School at the end of Block Avenue, on a site that was officially incorporated as a city park, *El Parque Anahuac*, in 1929. Sepúlveda notes that this park hosted night games, that semi-pro teams visited, and that one *Club Azteca* game attracted nearly 3,000 spectators. During the height of the Depression, the park fell into disuse, and the wood bleachers were taken for firewood. When coal was discovered just below the surface of the playing field, many people began digging up the precious resource. “By 1932,” writes Sepúlveda, “it would have been difficult to imagine that the field full of bumps and holes had one day been a respectable baseball stadium.”¹⁸

Games were also played at Grasselli Park, Washington Park, and E. J. E. Field, at Buffington Park near Gary, and at Turner Field in Hammond. Some of these Depression-era playing areas were less baseball parks than open areas named for their location near a local landmark. Grasselli Park, for example, lay beside the Grasselli Chemical Company, and the E. J. E. Field was little more than an open space near the E. J. E. Railroad yard. In 1942, Inland Steel would construct its new Block Stadium, named

¹⁷Sepúlveda, “Social Life and Nativism in La Colonia Del Harbor,” 86; *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77; *El Amigo de Hogar*, June 19, 1927.

¹⁸*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77; Sepúlveda, “Social Life and Nativism in La Colonia Del Harbor,” 87.

in honor of company director Emanuel J. Block, who had passed away two years earlier. Block Stadium remained a popular and well-used field through the 1970s.

Most of Inland Harbor's parks were city owned, and as such were open to both Mexican and non-Mexican teams. A 1926 report prepared for the East Chicago Chamber of Commerce had acknowledged that the "areas set aside for East Chicago [recreation] are too small to adequately serve the recreation needs of the city and should be materially enlarged." The report noted that improvements to Lees Park, one of seven highlighted in the report, would "give the city a most desirable and valuable site for a park, and it would be of sufficient size to include drives, a golf course, tennis courts, baseball field, and similar sport facilities." Two other parks that eventually hosted baseball, Todd Park in East Chicago and Washington Park in Indiana Harbor, also are highlighted in the report.¹⁹

In response to the Chamber of Commerce report, the Chamber and the city began to advocate for greater recreational opportunities. Cecil Austin, director of East Chicago's Department of Recreation, would write in the Chamber's magazine in June 1927—the same summer that the *Los Obreros* began fielding a baseball team—that his department provided activities ranging from the "making of doll clothes by the smaller girls to boxing by the men," as well as "tennis, swimming, boxing, baseball, playground ball, volley ball, track and field meets, [and] athletic clubs." Austin went on to report that the city planned to expand its sponsorship of athletic activities, including, most notably, the Industrial Basket Ball Leagues, which eventually consisted of eight teams.²⁰

LOS GALLOS, LAS GALLINAS AND A SENSE OF PLACE, 1936-1942

Many years ago, my brother Gabriel and I stood next to my mother as we greeted guests coming to her 75th birthday party. My mother was a long-time resident of Indiana Harbor and a visible leader in the local Mexican community, so many people attended the celebration; my brother and I knew almost every one of them. But every once in a while, my mother would introduce us to a friend she thought we did not know. As

¹⁹James Walker, *Planning for the Future of East Chicago, Indiana, A General Survey of its Social and Economic Problems* (East Chicago, Ind., 1926), 169-75.

²⁰Cecil Austin, *Community Recreation in East Chicago, Indiana* (East Chicago, Ind., 1927), 142.

one elderly gentleman and his wife slowly approached, my mother turned to Gabriel. “Son, this is . . .”—before she could say another word, Gabriel finished her sentence. “This is Joe Gonzalez!” he said enthusiastically. “I know Joe Gonzalez. Everybody knows Joe Gonzalez.” Gabriel greeted Joe warmly and respectfully.

Gabriel was partially right; by “everyone,” he meant the Mexicans from Indiana Harbor, where Joe is known as “Chinky” Gonzalez. As children in the late 1950s and 1960s, we had grown up hearing stories of our parents playing baseball and other sports. One of the community’s greatest athletes, the one who could most nearly be considered a legend, is Joe Gonzalez. In 1996, Gonzalez was inducted into the East Chicago, Indiana, Athletic Hall of Fame, the first Mexican to be inducted into the hall.²¹ Richard Gonzalez (no relation), who would accept a track scholarship to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, after World War II, remembers Joe passionately. “Now, Joe Gonzalez was a hell of a football player,” says Richard, recalling Gonzalez’s play for East Chicago Washington High School. “That man, he was capable of becoming the first Latino professional football player. When he tackled a guy, I mean, he was tackled.” Later in his life, when Richard met All-American pro football player Tom Harmon, who played for Horace Mann High School in Gary in the late 1930s, Harmon “mentioned many times that Joe Gonzales was the one who hit him the hardest in his football career.”²² Joe would receive all-state football honors in his senior year.

Old-timers in Indiana Harbor remember Joe, however, as much for his baseball prowess as for his football skills. In particular, Joe and several other Mexican athletes from the late 1930s are still honored for their participation with the *Gallos* baseball team, for whom Joe starred as a starting catcher. More than any other interwar team in Indiana Harbor, the *Gallos* are remembered, as the Señoras of Yesteryear put it, “with Mexican pride.”²³

Those who lived and played when the *Gallos* and *Gallinas* played baseball remember these teams not just for their athletic exploits, but for what they represented to the community. The Señoras of Yesteryear write that the *Gallos* “showed the way for all others who were to follow” during a time of economic depression, involuntary and voluntary repatriation, and intensified discrimination heightened by the onset of World War II. For them as for others in the Mexican community, the *Gallos*, *Gallinas*, and the

²¹*Northwest Indiana Times*, September 20, 1995.

²²Author interview with Richard Gonzalez, October 19, 2003.

²³*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 78.



Los Gallos, c. 1940. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the baseball team played an important role in the Mexican immigrant community of Indiana Harbor.

Front row, left to right, Joe Gonzalez, Angelo Llano, Gilbert Flores, Felix Perez, Fred Luna, Cipiriano Hernandez. Standing back row, left to right, Ramon Ramirez, unidentified, Joe Alamillo, Martin Vega, Robert Segovia, Joe Blanco, Trini Castillo, Rudolpho Perez, Henry Machuca, unidentified, Alfred Morales Sr., Florencio Soto.

Courtesy of the author

acts of watching and playing baseball further cemented their roots in the city and gave an outlet for community and ethnic pride. As Indiana Harbor resident Louis Vasquez wrote in his autobiography, “watching the neighborhood baseball club, the Gallos (the Roosters) playing baseball had been a real community event and one of my favorite childhood memories.”²⁴

My mother, Gloria Guerrero Fraire, was one of the original *Gallinas* players. She described baseball as a large, inclusive community activity.

We used to play and then the *Gallos* used to play. It was like a big festival day. Everybody would go out there and watch us play baseball. The guys would play first and then us or vice versa. I remember some people would make a day of it because even when we played at home we used to play way down on the end of Block Avenue. It wasn't like today where people could drive to the game and back

²⁴*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 78; James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Weasal: The Autobiography of Louis Vasquez* 24 (1995), 14.

and forth. We all had to walk there. So with two games it was a long day. Lots of people would take their sandwiches and tacos.²⁵

As important as they were to their community, it is surprisingly difficult to say just how and at what moment the *Gallos* were formed. The Señoras of Yesteryear write that the *Gallos* played from approximately 1938 to 1942. As Martin Vega pointed out, a few of the young men who had played for the *Juvenils* in 1928 later played for the *Gallos*, so there was some continuity between the teams of the earlier period and those of the late 1930s. Fred Maravilla recalled that in 1936 or 1937, the Missionary Catechists, established by Bishop John F. Noll at the new Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in 1927, “gave the boys enough equipment to start the team and eventually that small group became the *Gallos*.” Maravilla continues: “The first boys to play were from Our Lady Guadalupe Church—Raymond Ramirez, Martin Vega, David Godoy, the Machuca boys all played baseball. Martin was involved in playing a long time with the *Gallos*.”²⁶

Joe Gonzalez described the first *Gallos* as a group of high school-aged boys. “We were young,” says Joe, “about 15 or so at the time, when we all got together. Raymond Ramirez, he was a little bit older than us, loved sports and he wanted to be a manager. He wanted to get a group together to play ball. So we got all the young fellows out of high school and he made the *Gallos*. We got so good that we used to travel from place to place to play.”²⁷

Most of the Mexican baseball teams in the late 1930s, including the *Gallos* and the *Gallinas*, had some affiliation with Our Lady of Guadalupe. Gloria Guerrero Fraire said that the church

was the focus of the community. That’s where a lot of our teams came from. They would sponsor basketball, baseball and other teams and that’s where the *Gallinas* started, with the church. I was 14 or 15 when I played with the church teams. We used to play against other teams from out of town, in South Chicago, other

²⁵Author interview with Gloria Guerrero Fraire, October 18, 2003.

²⁶Author interview with Martin Vega, November 12, 2002; *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 77; author interview with Fred Maravilla, November 2, 2002.

²⁷Author interview with Joseph Gonzalez, October 5, 2001.

Mexican teams. It wasn't really a league. We would just call them up. . . . Everybody would go out there and watch us play baseball.²⁸

Carol Martinez, also a player for the *Gallinas*, adds, "I think the *Gallinas* were started one day because we were at the church having a meeting and we said how about having a baseball team, because we used to have CYO meetings."²⁹ Maravilla, who along with Ray Ramirez served as the *Gallinas*' first coach, also credits the Catholic Church with helping to establish the team.

I got involved with the *Gallinas* because Manuel Vega and I used to serve Mass. In 1937 during the steel strike, the big steel strike, Manuel and I went to work at the Mother house with the Catechist missionary sisters. They're called sisters now, but they were called Catechists at the time. We went to work at the Mother house, during the steel strike, when there was no work. And we were always serving Mass. We were good kids of the church. So when they decided to start the team the sisters chose me because I was a good boy, a good man. And I was already old enough to be a coach. . . . They provided the equipment for the girls and the uniforms. Most of the girls belonged to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. They were Catholics. You could tell from the uniforms that the Missionary Catechists or sisters wanted them to dress modest. No shorts, and limbs were covered.³⁰

As their names suggested, the *Gallos* and *Gallinas* were closely related in their origins. Aurora Gonzalez explains that "the *Gallinas* was born because the *Gallos* were an inspiration to them. . . . The girls wanted to be part of the scene because it was exciting."³¹ Eventually, the *Gallinas* developed a following of their own, becoming what Chicano sports his-

²⁸Author interview with Gloria Guerrero Fraire, October 18, 2003.

²⁹Author interview with Carol Martinez, November 12, 2003.

³⁰Author interview with Fred Maravilla, November 2, 2002. Gloria Guerrero Fraire also adds that the girls' uniform was a concern: "I remember we wore shorts, but we had to wear wrap around skirts. Then later on we were able to get long, green satin uniforms with a strip on the side. They were real hot for playing." Author interview with Gloria Guerrero Fraire, October 18, 2003.

³¹Author interview with Aurora Gonzalez, October 5, 2001.



Las Gallinas, c. 1941. The womens' softball team was formed shortly after *Los Gallos* because "the girls wanted to be part of the scene." The author's mother, Gloria Guerrero Fraire, kneels at the far right on the front row.

Courtesy of the author

torian Richard Santillán has called one of the "best-known women's team in the Midwest."³²

In 1930, Chicago Bishop Bernard J. Sheil authorized the organization of men's softball and hardball baseball teams, as well as women's and men's basketball teams, under the auspices of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). In his study of the CYO, Timothy B. Neary credits the organization with using sports to support "its message of equality and universalism"; the group's inherently egalitarian approach to sports allowed anyone to participate as long as they represented a parish. Although the dioceses in Chicago and Northwest Indiana were segregated, Neary writes that the "city wide youth program provided numerous opportunities for black/white interaction."³³ His work focuses only on Chicago, but the CYO provided

³²Santillán, "Mexican Baseball Teams in the Midwest, 1916-1965," 140.

³³Timothy B. Neary, "An Inalienable Right to Play: African American Participation in the Catholic Youth Organization," in Elliott J. Gorn, ed., *Sports in Chicago* (Urbana, Ill., 2008), 165, 188.

a home for the *Gallos* and other boys' teams such as the *Guadalupanos* in Indiana Harbor. CYO sponsorship also helps to explain the existence of a fairly extensive chronicle of box scores and stories that can be reviewed in the local English-language daily, the *Calumet News*.

As the newspaper's records make clear, by 1936, the Northwest Indiana CYO had organized a baseball league of sixteen teams, organized in three divisions. While it is clear that other East Chicago churches, such as St. Stanislaus (a Polish parish), also fielded teams, the paper makes no mention of Our Lady of Guadalupe until 1941, when it reported that the "Lady of Guadalupe Junior softball team trounced Assumption, 10 to 3 in the first of a three game playoff series for the Junior Church Softball League."³⁴ The *Guadalupanos* of OLG, a team of high-school-age ball players, received their first coverage in 1942. A lack of earlier news coverage of OLG teams does not mean that they did not exist, of course. Unfortunately, efforts to seek confirmation of earlier origins in the church's own records are stymied by the loss of those records in a fire that destroyed the church in 1939.

Unlike the teams that had played in Indiana Harbor in the mid- and late 1920s, the teams of the late 1930s played in organized leagues. In addition to the CYO, the *Gallos* and other Mexican baseball teams played teams affiliated with the Calumet City Twilight League, a league of teams from Indiana and Illinois; the Twin City Twilight League, an East Chicago city league of local clubs; and the Hammond League, a regional league with teams from Hammond, Whiting, East Chicago, Indiana Harbor, Gary, and Calumet City.

Many of the teams, including the *Gallos* and *Gallinas*, also promoted themselves and independently sought out other teams to play. Local papers featured frequent advertisements or articles on behalf of teams looking for appropriate opponents—the *News*, for example, reported that Joe Nemeth, manager of the Northside Boosters, was "willing to schedule baseball games on the home and home basis."³⁵

The *Gallinas*, according to Fred Maravilla, operated in much the same way: "As the manager and coach, my job was to find other teams to play... We played teams in South Chicago. We played against teams in Gary and other teams in Indiana Harbor and Chicago." Carol Martinez adds:

³⁴*Calumet News*, August 28, 1941.

³⁵*Calumet News*, May 11, 1934.



The Woodmen of the World, c. 1941. The Woodmen were among several East Chicago teams whose members came from the Mexican community. The author's grandfather Victor Guerrero, who coached the team, stands at far right. His uncle Joe Guerrero sits in the middle of the second row, and his uncle Richard Gonzalez stands second from the right in the back row.

Courtesy of the author

The *Gallinas* used to play the black team from Gary. Lots of people were afraid to play the black team. I don't know, not afraid-afraid, just fearful of their reaction. We only went there a few times, but they came here too. Whenever we went there or they came here it was sort of tense. We only played them two or three years.³⁶

Yet it was against other Mexican girls' teams from South Chicago, according to Gloria Guerrero Fraire, that the games were most raucous. Those games usually "ended up in fist fights."³⁷

³⁶Author interview with Fred Maravilla, November 2, 2002; author interview with Carol Martinez, November 12, 2003.

³⁷Author interview with Gloria Guerrero Fraire, October 18, 2003.

In addition to the *Gallos* and *Gallinas*, two other Mexican teams of some prominence from Indiana Harbor played in the local leagues in the late 1930s: *Los Guadalupanos* of the OLG, and *Las Aguilas Mexicanas*, or Mexican Eagles. The *Gallos* and *Las Aguilas* received consistent coverage in the *Calumet News* through 1942, at which time most of the players went off to war. *Los Guadalupanos* continued to receive regular coverage in 1943. Richard Santillán writes that midwestern Mexican baseball often had the feel of a whirlwind tour, as the “visiting team and its supporters gathered in the early morning forming a huge caravan of cars moving along on country roads.” Martin Vega recalls similar memories of the *Gallos*’ experience under manager Nap Ruez:

He took us under his wing and he had a truck that fit the whole team. We used to go all over Indiana, Southern Indiana, all over, and to places with no Latins, just Anglos. The manager set it up, not us. He would find teams for us to play. We played an all-star team from Mexico. And we even played a professional team from Michigan we called the House of David because they all had beards.³⁸

Gallos and *Gallinas* games were announced by word of mouth or by creative advertising. “We used to advertise our games with chalk on the street,” says Carol Martinez. “We’d write: ‘Las Gallinas, Saturday at 1.’ The *Gallos* were usually at a different time.” Aurora Gonzalez also remembers the sidewalk signs. “I don’t know who was the one,” she says. “But someone used to write all the information with chalk, about where the game was going to be held, what time, and when the truck was leaving.” Going to games in her older brother’s old truck, she recalls, “was the first time we got exposure to outside people.”³⁹

From box scores in the *Calumet News* as well as the published recollections of the Señoras of Yesteryear, we can gain a good idea of the core group of young men who played for the *Gallos* in the years of 1937 to 1942. Joe Gonzalez, mentioned earlier, was the catcher who “handled

³⁸Santillán, “Mexican Baseball Teams in the Midwest, 1916-1965,” 137; author interview with Martin Vega, November 12, 2002; Joe Hawkins and Terry Bertolino, *House of David Baseball Team: Images of America* (Charleston, S. C.), 2000.

³⁹Author interview with Carol Martinez, November 12, 2003; author interview with Aurora Gonzalez, October 5, 2001.

the Gallos pitchers flawlessly and had an amazing talent for catching and was a great hitter.” Some of the players, such as pitchers Benny Ortega and José Sosa Alamillo, shortstop Martin Vega, and first baseman Nacho Valencia, had also played for the *Juvenils* baseball team in the late 1920s. Vega and second baseman Leo Hernandez, the Señoras reported, “were one of the region’s best keystone combinations.”⁴⁰

Joe Gonzalez remembers his playing days with the *Gallos*, and like Martin Vega, he recalls traveling to Illinois to play the great Kansas City Monarchs.

Satchel Paige played for [the Monarchs]. We went all the way down there. They were professional almost, semi-pro. So we went down there. We just wanted to play baseball and we played. They found out that we were not just talking. We had come out to play. We were giving them a good, good game and Satchel Paige didn’t pitch at the beginning. After awhile, he had to come in and start pitching because their team was not doing as good. We were outplaying them, beating them. He was a terrific pitcher. I don’t think I hit him good, but I might have got a scratch hit, but he was too good. He was excellent.⁴¹

Despite the *Gallos*’ popularity, no record exists of their finishing higher than the third place that they took in the Twin City Twilight Baseball League in 1940. Yet the press, biased though it may be, often wrote glowingly of the team. In a commemorative journal for the Hammond Braves of that era, the *Gallos* are remembered respectfully.

[The Braves] remained in Calumet City League, and the Hammond League was changed to a night league with all games being played under the lights at Turner Field, and it was a tough league with two new strong entries in the Los Gallos Mexican team from Indiana Harbor and the East Chicago Merchants. . . We defeated Los Gallos every time we played them, but one game went 11 innings before we could win it. It was midnight when we finished.⁴²

⁴⁰*Mexican American Harbor Lights*, 78.

⁴¹Author interview with Joseph Gonzalez, October 5, 2001.

⁴²Hammond Historical Society, *Hammond Braves, 1938-1947* (Hammond, Ind., 1979), 40.

The *Gallos*, like all clubs, ceased to field a team during the war, especially after 1942 when almost every Mexican in the East Chicago Washington High School graduating class, the largest to date at that time, enlisted into the service. With many Mexican residents, men and women, enlisting in the war effort, those few Mexican publications that exist from the period turned their focus to the involvement of Mexicans in the war. The *Gallos* continued to play for a few years after World War II, using returning veterans, such as Richard Gonzalez, now in their twenties.

In their efforts to determine the extent of Americanization within the Mexican community of urban areas like Indiana Harbor during the interwar period, scholars have typically relied on quantitative measures, such as the numbers of Mexican residents applying for U.S. citizenship, the success rate of Christian Americanization efforts, indicators of residents' economic status, and measurable instances of racism and discrimination. What those measures fail to take into account is the degree to which the Mexican community was already involved in activities—such as baseball—that might be considered very expressive of the U.S. national culture, and the extent to which those activities were well-established as early as the mid-1920s. The residents of Indiana Harbor's Mexican community were part of a constantly transforming country. They lived in an urban and industrial area, worked in the steel mills and other industrial work sites, and partook of a shared social environment that included extensive participation in organized sports and other recreational activities. Their efforts to build organizations such as baseball teams integrated them into U.S. society in ways that cannot be easily measured or quantified.⁴³

Sports historian José Alamillo has argued that baseball served “to unify and empower the Mexican community through self-organization, cultural expression, and political assertion within the context of limited economic opportunities and racial discrimination.”⁴⁴ Through their participation on teams such as the *Gallos* and *Gallinas*, the men and women of my parents' generation in Indiana Harbor maintained and expressed their culture within the context of familiar markers of broader national culture. Their early adoption of baseball was just one indication of their desire to

⁴³Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana, Ill., 2008); Dionicio Valdés, “The Mexican American Dream and World War II: A View from the Midwest,” in Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, ed., *Mexican Americans & World War II* (Austin, Tex., 2005), 115-40; Ruth Hutchinson Crocker, “Gary Mexicans and ‘Christian Americanization’: A Study in Cultural Conflict,” in *Forging a Community*, eds. Lane and Escobar, 115-34.

become U.S./American. Yet their simultaneous decision to express their *Mexicanidad* through explicit signs, such as the Mexican names that they assigned to their teams, shows the continued strength of their connection to a distinct ethnic community. They expressed a Mexican identity within the context of one of the most accepted and recognized expressions of U.S. national culture.

In his contribution to Elliott J. Gorn's history of Chicago sports, sport historian Gerald Gems has asked some of the right questions to lead us closer to an understanding of this dual role of baseball in the urban community. "Given the cosmopolitan nature of the city, the intensity of its political and labor issues, and its racial turmoil," Gems writes, "how did Chicagoans come to agree upon anything particularly sports?"⁴⁵

Some of the answer, I believe, can be found in Alamillo's appropriation of Benedict Anderson's term "imagined community" to describe the power of baseball to promote a "shared sense of nationality in the Mexican patriotic celebrations."⁴⁶ Reading the transcripts of interviews with those who played for and watched teams such as the *Gallos*, *Gallinas*, *Juvenils*, and *Los Obreros*, one cannot help but sense the ethnic pride with which these elders recall the teams and the players. As Joe "Chinky" Gonzalez commented:

We had a following. All the people from the Harbor used to follow us all the way around; so this is why they put the notices out on the street. This was our enjoyment. And after awhile, we got a little bit older, we worked. We used to go to work; work during the daytime, play ball at night, or played on the weekends. We got to be so good playing baseball that we used to travel and we'd travel from city to city and play different teams. Like she [Joe's wife Aurora Gonzalez] says, they used to write up on those corners, and we used to play on weekends, on Saturdays and Sundays. "Are you going to play at Westin Park? Are we going to play at Grasselli Park or are we going to play someplace else in a different city?" Everyone wanted to know.⁴⁷

⁴⁴José M. Alamillo, "Mexican American Baseball: Masculinity, Racial Struggle, and Labor Politics in Southern California, 1930-1950," in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard (New York, 2002), 109.

⁴⁵Gerald R. Gems, *Windy City Wars: Labor, Leisure, and Sport in the Making of Chicago* (Lanham, Md., 1997), ix.

⁴⁶Alamillo, "Mexican American Baseball," 99.

⁴⁷Author interview with Joseph Gonzalez, October 5, 2001.

Yet, in addition to its contribution to the smaller imagined community of Mexican ethnics adapting to life in an industrial American city, the development and popularity of baseball in places like Indiana Harbor can also be understood as an outward expression of a U.S. national identity and culture. The two trends are not incompatible—indeed the latter seems to depend on the former. As Anderson writes, “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind”; the keys to understanding the development of nationalism, he continues, lie in its “cultural roots.”⁴⁸ Such roots are keenly felt among ethnic communities such as the Mexicans of Indiana Harbor, even as the members of those communities go on to define themselves as Americans. As they played or watched baseball in the years from the 1920s to the 1940s, the young women and men of Indiana Harbor joined in a larger national community that expressed itself through the rituals and practice of this uniquely American sport.

Whether the baseball teams were a “tool of survival” and an expression of their members’ efforts at becoming Mexican, as Gloria Arredondo argues, or they “served to unify and empower the Mexican community through self-organization, cultural expression, and political assertion within the context of limited economic opportunities and racial discrimination,” as Alamillo writes, it is evident that baseball in the Mexican community of Indiana Harbor developed not in isolation but as part of a national movement promoting recreation in general, and baseball in particular, as tools for assimilation and advancement in American urban culture. The development of Mexican baseball teams, from its beginning, belonged to this larger trend in urban cultural development.⁴⁹

While the players of *Los Obreros*, the *Juvenils*, and other Mexican baseball teams in Indiana Harbor no doubt faced discrimination, lived at the bottom of the economic ladder, and developed their *Mexicanidad* or Mexican pride in their baseball teams in response to that discrimination, they nevertheless played baseball as much for the enjoyment of taking part in a larger shared American culture as they did for the purpose of expressing their singularity as a separate community. They played baseball not as Mexican nationals, but rather as representatives of the Mexican community of Indiana Harbor—as fully participating Americans.

⁴⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York, 2006), 4, 7.

⁴⁹Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*, 11; Alamillo, “Mexican American Baseball,” 87.

So when I think back about my nephews in Chicago, I still think my brother Gabriel and I played better baseball at that age, but I also believe the Gallos played better baseball than we did. The difference in the three generations of Fraires-Guerreros is that my generation played baseball as an integral everyday activity of our lives, and my parents' generation played baseball as a developing expression of their U.S./American identity and their Mexicanidad. My nephews, on the other hand, just played baseball because it was a fun recreational activity on a Saturday afternoon in Chicago.

