

Bethlehem Moment: Puerto Ricans come to Bethlehem

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff September 4, 2019

(Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem Moments)

Bethlehem Moment 12

City Council

September 3, 2019

Olga Negron, Bethlehem City Councilwoman

[video](#)

As we get ready to celebrate “Hispanic Heritage Month,” I challenge everyone to think about the Latino members of our community, what brought us here, and what kind of investment we have in our community.

Bethlehem Moment: 1948

Beginning in 1948, migrants from Puerto Rico came to the Lehigh Valley as seasonal contract farm workers. The orchards and potato fields of the region had depended on a supply of cheap labor that had always been met by the large families of the Pennsylvania German population. In the Depression-era 1930s, there had been plenty of workers.

But in the post-war era, farmers discovered their traditional source of labor was unwilling to work the long hours for the wages they wanted to pay. So Puerto Ricans filled the void, in the garment mills of Allentown and at Bethlehem Steel's coke works, where they occupied the same rung on the employment ladder that the Mexicans had in the 1920s. The largest number lived on the south side of the Lehigh River near the Bethlehem Steel plant. Others lived in public housing in a project in the northeast corner of the city.

Migrant job seekers, usually young men, came first to look for work. When they found it, they sent word back to their rural home villages, such as Patillas and Corozal, that there was work in Bethlehem.

By 1960, when 56 percent of the Lehigh Valley's work force was in either the textile or metal industries, Puerto Ricans were well represented.

Most of these early migrants from Puerto Rico were unskilled. At first they were welcomed because they filled the kind of jobs, in a booming economy, that most whites didn't want.

But by the early 1960s, tensions between Puerto Ricans and south Bethlehem's older, more settled ethnic European community were rising. The same prejudice and ethnic stereotypes that were directed at the Mexicans "that they should have the hottest jobs because they could stand the heat" were directed at Puerto Ricans.

Yet Puerto Ricans continued to come to south Bethlehem, where they formed such cultural civic groups as the Puerto Rican Beneficial Society and the Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations. In 2003, they made up a large part of the South Side, and more than 33,000 lived in the Lehigh Valley and worked in virtually every facet of the job market.

*This is part of an article published by the Morning Call in Dec 10, 2003,
titled: Forging America: The History of Bethlehem Steel – Chapter 7.*