

## Twentieth Century Settlers in the Blackstone Valley

Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

### From Barranquilla to Blackstone

In 1964 the Valley's textile industry needed skilled loom fixers and weavers. With fewer young people following their parents into this trade, companies weren't sure where to look. Joseph Guitarri, whose father owned Lyons Fabric, Inc., visited a place with a textile industry as advanced as the Valley's and filled with highly skilled weavers: Barranquilla, Colombia. There he immediately hired three expert workmen. Soon many mills from the Valley began recruiting workers from Medellin, a larger mill center in Colombia. What began as three workers became thousands. The early 1970s was the high point of Colombian immigration to the Blackstone. When recruitment from mills in the Valley stopped, Colombians continued to come. Those who had made their first American homes in New York City, like Stella Carrera, decided to move to a safer and quieter area and came to the Valley to look for work.



Left: Crowning of Carnavale Queen, 1976



Right: Carnavale Queen at annual Colombian Independence Day Festival, early 1990s, both courtesy of Gloria Isabel Hincapie

### Making a Community Work for You

When the first Colombians came to Rhode Island, they could not find much that reminded them of home. Even Colombian food was hard to find. Many had to travel to Fefa's Market in Providence. Soon dozens of stores and restaurants lined Broad and Dexter Streets in Central Falls, like El Paisa and La Sopresa, near the center of the Colombian neighborhood.



Dilone Market, Spanish & American Foods, Arnold Street, Woonsocket, photo by Stephanie Fortunato



Begun by some of the first Colombian immigrants to the Valley, the Colombian American Cultural Society still helps new arrivals acclimate and

educates the community about Colombian history and heritage. Other groups, such as Progreso Latino, have broadened their base to address the needs of residents from diverse Latino backgrounds. There are now Spanish language newspapers and cable television shows, and in 2005 Dr. Pablo Rodriguez and Reynaldo Almonte launched Latino Public Radio.



Top and above: Annual Colombian Independence Day Festival in downtown Pawtucket, both photos by Dalila Goulart

### One Language, Many Cultures

Although a handful of Mexican immigrants came to New England in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1990s this population grew tremendously. Many Mexican immigrants have moved into communities like Central Falls, where they can find similar cultural and language-based resources. They also bring their own distinct food, music, and customs, broadening an already impressive mosaic of Latin American cultures in the Valley, including Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, El Salvadorians, and others.



Taqueria Lupita restaurant, Dexter Street, Central Falls, photo by C. Morgan Grefe



Bertina Ramos, co-owner of Taqueria Lupita, photo by C. Morgan Grefe