

Federal Writer's Project Interview, Case #8, with a Male Immigrant from Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, 1939

Lesson type: Worksheet

Historical Context

During the 1930s and 1940s, there was heavy migration from Puerto Rico to the continental U.S. by people in search of better economic conditions. In 1945, there were 13,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York City. By 1955, there were 700,000, and by the mid-1960s, there were over one million.

The Puerto Rican people, or Puerto Ricans, are U.S. citizens originating from Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are largely the descendants of native Taíno Indians, Spaniards, and African slaves. Other groups that have settled in Puerto Rican are the Lebanese, Scots, Corsican, Irish, French, German, Chinese, and people from other West Indian islands.

This is an interview of a Puerto Rican immigrant by a reporter working for the Federal Writers' Project during the Great Depression. It is part of the Spanish Book.

Essential Question

Why do people migrate?

How does migration affect the migrant and the community into which they migrate?

Check for Understanding

Summarize the main idea of this document and evaluate the significance of the information obtained from this interview.

(1)

"I was born in Rio Piedras (home of the University of Porto Rico), 38 years ago, brought to live in San Juan after my father's death at the age of 10, and came to this city in 1922. In San Juan my mother and I lived with her sister, married to an American Sergeant of the P. R. Regiment and a veteran of the Spanish American War, for which distinction the Military Government would allow him a house on the military zone. To cover hers and my clothing expenses my mother would do some cheap sewing for the retail stores in the city. Her income was about \$3 or \$4 per week. My aunt wouldn't accept any contribution from my mother for her ordinary expenses. At the age of 11 my mother died, and I was fortunate to be admitted in a charitable institution, the Boys' Charity School in Santurce. This orphanage for boys is kept and supported by the Insular Government and is very similar to the 'homes' in the United States. It is virtually regulated according to military discipline. In all we were about 300 pupils distributed in four companies, A, B, C, and D, besides the band. The purpose was not military, though. Education in the institution included several trades, carpentry, cabinet-making, masonry, tailoring, shoe-making, brick-laying, plumbing and music, besides elementary school graduation. The school training and validity of its course was authorized and accepted by the insular Department of Education. Pupils had the choice of one trade and music if he so desired. I learned to play trombone, which I neglected practically as soon as I was released. I also learned a little of the plumbing trade, and which training was very useful in my own start in life. At the age of 16 pupils are released under the care and tutorship of a responsible relative. In my case, I was 17 when released to an uncle living in Rio Piedras, as my aunt had come to live in New York ~~after~~ when her husband was transferred to the Governor's Island Post. With my uncle I lived only some 6 months. I went back to live in San Juan where I got a job with a plumber in whose house I was living without any charges for my boarding. As a matter a mere generosity he'd give me two or three dollars every week, for I was supposed to be learning the trade under his guidance. With him I stayed until I was 20 and making \$7.00 every week.

Document Description

Interview with a man from Puerto Rico, conducted by José Pastrana, reporter for the New York City Unit of the Federal Writers' Project, February 23, 1939. From Spanish Book—Life Histories (Part 1).

Questions

1. Why is Rio Piedras an important city in Puerto Rico?

Historical Challenge

Research the history of East Harlem (El Barrio). Focus on twentieth century residents of the neighborhood. Which ethnic group was predominant prior to the wave of Puerto Ricans who settled there? Why did so many Puerto Ricans choose this area of New York City as their home? How is El Barrio changing today?

Interdisciplinary Connections

Art: Draw a sketch of one of the rooms described in this interview.

Math: Movies cost ten cents in 1939. How much do they cost today? Why has the price gone up? How much did it cost to go to a baseball game? Can most people afford to go to one today?

Resources

1. <http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm>