

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

Lesson type: Worksheet

Grade Level: Elementary School

Middle School

High School

Lesson Topic: Latinos > Immigration and Migration

Immigration > Latino

New York State Learning Standard: Social Studies > Standard 1: US/NY History >

Key Idea 1: Culture

Social Studies > Standard 1: US/NY History > Key Idea 3: People

Social Studies > Standard 2: World History > Key Idea 3: People

Social Studies > Standard 4: Economics > Key Idea 1: Content

Social Studies > Standard 5: Civics, Citizenship, and Government > Key Idea 3:

Citizenship

Common Core Standard: English Language Arts and Literacy > 6-12 > Reading >

Key Ideas and Details

English Language Arts and Literacy > 6-12 > Reading > Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

English Language Arts and Literacy > 6-12 > Reading > Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

21st Century Skills: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Information Literacy

Social and Cross-Cultural Skills

Education Project: Electronic Schoolhouse/La Escuela Electrónica

Funder: Time Warner

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 Rico 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.

"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 here 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 of 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.

"My new tutor and protector was kind to me, no doubt, but was too strict and in several instances punished me like a slave, slapping and even kicking me. I certainly appreciated and felt grateful to him, but resented his maltreatment and decided to go away from him and live my own life no matter what happened in the future.

"My next move was to Santo Domingo with a plumbing engineer who had some contracts with the government of this country. I was contracted as a helper and my wages would be \$9.00 a week. Here I worked almost 2 years and then returned to San Juan from where I came to New York in 1922. I paid \$40.00 for my passage in one of the N. Y. & P. R. boats.

"While in San Juan I had heard of the great shortage of labor help in New York. Many of my friends and acquaintances had come to this city. Some of them were employed at wages rating 2 or 3 times more than in Puerto Rico. Others weren't so fortunate, but still were making much better than at home. Therefore, I made up my mind not to waste this opportunity, considering that in Puerto Rico I'd never be able to progress as I wished to.

"I arrived in New York during the summer season, and soon went after a job in my trade. I hadn't as yet considered the difficulties of the language, which I never had a chance to practice while at home or in Santo Domingo; the lack of experience even in my own trade; the great difference between the equipment and installation as compared to those at home; the exigencies of union and knowledge of this trade in New York, all which ^{make me} look ~~ed~~ very backward in the grade. At this time I realized that I had to look forward something else to make a living.

"I was rooming with a Puerto Rican family with whom I had been acquainted in my home town. At the time we were living down in 17th. Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. This was then a large settlement of Puerto Ricans, most of them employed by the National Biscuit Company (14th. to 16th. Street on 9th. Ave). Here I found work as a labor hand, in the 'Uneda' crackers department, loading and unloading the hand trucks inside the bakery, for \$24.00 a week.

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"It was a hard and even painful job, but somehow I got used to it. Besides, at this time I married a girl from my hometown, who was also working in the packing department of the 'National', as we used to call the factory. One year after my marriage I lost my job after suffering an accident and breaking my right wrist, although my wife kept on working until one and a half year when she had her first baby. In the mean time I was doing odd jobs, porter, bus-boy, dish-washer, etcetera.

"In 1929 my second child was born. I couldn't find a steady job and had to keep on working when and wherever I'd found any job. In those days I suffered horribly. Poverty and misery striking hardly on my wife and kids I moved up to Lower Harlem where a great nucleus of Puerto Ricans and South Americans had established their quarters. I moved into ~~xx~~ \$24.00 a month apartment, 3 almost unsanitary rooms. A friend of mine told me about ~~x~~ the Charity Organization Society in 125th. Street where I went looking for help for my family. This society took immediate care of my case and my worries and suffering were over for about a year when they got me a job as a porter in the Times Building for \$22.00 a week. ✓

"From this job I went to work in the Automat at 86th. Street near Lexington Avenue as coffee man. I worked here until 1936 when I was making \$24.00 wages. Again hard luck stroke me. This time I caught pneumonia, which kept me away from my job for one month. On returning to work I was informed that some one had taken my place and that I had to wait until there was another chance. Again I had to go back to wash dishes. In the mean time my wife had had two more children and my older daughter had died.

"By the middle of 1937 I was again unemployed and applied for relief which was given to me in one month time. Our rent is paid every month and with whatever is left of the food check, plus some 'bootlegging' plumbing that I do once in a while in the business places in the neighborhood, I manage to carry on the burden of ~~xxxxxxxx~~ keeping my family away from starvation...

"We go to the movies, a 10 cent one, every ~~week~~. Like baseball and prizefighting but can't afford attending these sports. This small radio constitutes our major recreation. I read LA VOZ, the Spanish daily and often any one of the city tabloids.

"I have great respect and admiration toward American insitutions. Am a good law-abiding citizen. Never have been in a court room. Have no plans for the future, but hope that I can live to see my children well educated. At my age, and handicapped with this broken wrist, I don't expect any further betterment regarding my economic condition.

OBSERVATIONS.- This people live in a tenement located on 111th. Street near Park Avenue. The building, as well as the surroundings, ~~xxx~~ is filthy and loitered with garbage. The stairway to the top-floor is dim and humid; the steps are worn and in dangerous condition. The steam-hitting is very poor and out out at 9 in the evenings. And old davenport and resting chair constitute the ~~main~~ best 2 pieces of furniture in the living room. There are also 2 old dining room chairs, a side table a dresser's cabinet with a mirror hanging from the wall and a small radio. The ceiling has been whitewashed some four years ago. It's cracked and has stains caused by the humidity. A glass in one of the windows is broken and patched with a piece of card board. There is no linoleum on the floor, although the woodwork is kept clean.

In the living room there is a double-bed covered only by a dark blanket, a piece of mirror nailed to the wall, a small table and cloth hanging from a home-made closet.

The next room is crowded with a convertible couch, a single bed, a broken chair and a few pieces of clothing, toys and books scattered around. This is the children's sleeping room.

The kitchen is furnished with a steel table, only 3 chairs, an old fashioned gas stove and wash-tub connected with the sink.

The bath room is small. This reporter couldn't examine it at the moment.

February 23, 1939

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?
2. Describe this man's childhood in Puerto Rico.
3. Why did he decide to come to New York?
4. How did he get to New York? How much was his passage?
5. Where did he settle once he was in New York City? Why?
6. Why did he have to give up the trade he had in Puerto Rico when he came to the U.S.?
7. Where did he get a job? In what type of industry?
8. List the kinds of hardships he faced during the Great Depression.
9. How does he manifest a spirit of optimism?

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>
2. <http://www.prdream.com/>
3. <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/cuban3.html>
4. <http://centropr.org/>
5. <http://welcome.topuertorico.org/history.shtml>
6. http://www.rootsweb.com/~prhgs/photo_25.htm, Photo of the S.S. Coamo
7. <http://www.latinworld.com/caribe/puertorico/books/index.html>
8. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>
9. http://www.rapidimmigration.com/usa/1_eng_immigration_history.html
10. http://ellislandrecords.org/immexp/wseix_4_3.asp?
11. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab02.html>
12. <http://coloquio.com/famosos/>
13. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/>
14. <http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1174&subm=45&area=Investigate>
15. <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/reference/hisref.htm>
16. José A. Cobas and Jorge Duany. *Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity*. Gaineville: University Press of Florida, 1997.
17. Matos-Rodriguez, Felix. *Pioneros: Puerto Ricans in New York City 1892-1948*. Arcadia Publishing, 2001.