

Cinco de Mayo Festival

By Nancy Nusz, Oregon Folklife Program

Portland's *Cinco de Mayo* Fiesta is held annually at Portland's Tom McCall Waterfront Park and is organized by the Portland Guadalajara Sister City Association (PGSCA). The three-day Fiesta celebrates the richness and diversity of family, culture, and community, with authentic Latino art, music, dance, cuisine, and hand-made crafts. *Cinco de Mayo* commemorates a victorious battle that took place near Puebla, Mexico, on May 5, 1862, when 4,500 Mexican militia men triumphed over 6,500 soldiers of the invading French army.

Prior to the 1950s, and as early as the 1850s, immigrants from Mexico worked as mule drivers, sheepherders, *vaqueros*, or cowboys, and as migrant laborers in rural Oregon. By the 1900s, and particularly during the labor-strapped war years from 1941-1946, Mexican laborers filled positions as field hands under the *bracero* program, working the hop, bean, and sugar beet fields of rural Oregon. When the *bracero* program was terminated in 1964, members of Oregon's Mexican community had already teamed up with social organizations to demand improvement of the substandard living and working conditions that were part and parcel of the *bracero* program and migrant work in general. The Valley Migrant League, founded in 1965, and the Oregon State Chicano *Concilio*, founded in 1974, sought to improve educational and bi-lingual programs for Mexican children and adults alike, and recommended that more local, state, and federal government jobs be opened to Chicanos. By the 1980s, the affect of these earlier movements showed some success and more persons of Latin American descent were moving from rural regions to the Portland metro area. By 2002, the Chicano population in Portland numbered more than 100,000. Spanish-language newspapers, radio stations, and annual celebrations attest to the growing and continued development of the Chicano population in Portland and a new generation of professionals, entrepreneurs, and city officials marks clearly the continued change in the role that Chicanos play in the shaping of Portland and Oregon.

Written by Sarah Griffith, © Oregon Historical Society, 2003

Oregon History Project

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/cinco-de-mayo-festival/>