

RESURGENT MEXICAN PHOENIX*

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ABSTRACT. Popular impressions of Phoenix, Arizona perpetuate the notion that this metropolitan area is an overwhelmingly Anglo place. We challenge this assertion and demonstrate that the city has substantial Mexican roots and is presently being shaped by a vibrant, resurgent Mexican population. Employing historical records, surveys, and landscape data, we articulate the Mexican character of early Phoenix and highlight how the revival of Mexican Phoenix has transformed the urban landscape. We then relate how Phoenix's Mexican population is a more nuanced regional subculture formed through both historical and contemporary connections with specific Mexican states. We conclude with a call for greater understanding of the internal heterogeneity of Mexicans in the United States and how this can inform our geographical interpretations of the growing Latinization of American cities.
Keywords: Mexican, Phoenix, regional identity, urban landscape.

As popular understanding of Phoenix's mythical namesake focuses singularly on the firebird's magnificent rebirth, so too do many of the city residents' notions about the development of the largest center in the U.S. Southwest. For most, metropolitan Phoenix spontaneously sprang from the desert, exploding from a population of around 100,000 in the 1940s to its current estimated 4 million residents (C. Sargent 1988; U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Nostalgic reflections on the city's short history tend to accentuate this boomtown narrative and disproportionately focus on non-Hispanic achievements in conquering the arid desert environment.¹ This perception of early Phoenix as an almost entirely Anglo metropolis persists despite evidence of substantial Mexican roots in the city. For example, regardless of Phoenix's nascent Mexican population, early adobe architecture, proximity to Mexico, and historic southward connections, the pantheon of historic local luminaries is represented by figures from faraway Missouri, Michigan, and Connecticut. These personalities include John W. "Jack" Swilling, a Missourian associated with the founding of Phoenix; Dr. Alexander J. Chandler, a veterinarian from Michigan, who became a land speculator and canal developer; and Charles Trumbull Hayden, a Connecticut-born businessman who founded the flour mill around which the suburban city of Tempe emerged. Similarly, representations of contemporary Phoenix ignore its original Mexican heritage and instead promote images of verdant golf courses, azure swimming pools, and a pseudo-Mediterranean lifestyle that strive to clearly differentiate the metropolitan area from other quintessentially Mexican or Spanish southwestern cities such as Tucson, Arizona, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas.

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