

## Tucson's Mexican Pioneers

### Tucson's Mexican Heritage

Tucson's first non-native permanent residents were Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries who moved into the new Tucson presidio in the fall of 1776. After a decade of almost continuous fighting against fierce nomadic Apaches, peace was established under a new Spanish policy that encouraged the Apache to settle near presidios in return for food rations. Spanish settlers, attracted by the relative safety of the Tucson presidio, soon arrived to farm the banks of the Santa Cruz River, to mine in the surrounding hills, and to graze cattle.

The Spanish were able to essentially "partner" with resident Pimas and Papagos along the Santa Cruz River, initially working out farmland and irrigation agreements, and using these more sedentary Native Americans as an early warning system against hostile Apaches. For decades Tucson prospered with the population slowly growing.

After Mexico achieved its independence from Spain in 1821, an economic depression curtailed the support to Apaches settled around the Tucson presidio; Apaches resumed raiding ranches in southern Arizona. As difficult economic times eased, Tucson saw the beginning of Anglo American immigration – mostly people passing through – like trappers, California gold seekers, military men, and transcontinental route explorers.

When the U.S. took over Tucson in 1854 with the Gadsden Purchase, Tucson was still a Mexican village of perhaps 500 people. As anthropologist Thomas E. Sheridan wrote in his book *Los Tucsonenses*, "[Mexicans] and their descendants continued to raise families and run businesses in southern Arizona. They became cattlemen, freighters, Indian fighters, and merchants. They built schools, erected churches, established newspapers, and enforced the law. Without them, territorial Tucson could never have been created. They helped transform a little finger of Sonora into a commercial center of the southwestern United States."

Anglos who prospered did so in partnership with Mexicans and catered to the larger Mexican population. The two groups treated each other with respect in mutually interdependent relationships. Anglos and Mexicans joined Pima and Papago Indians in expeditions against their common enemy – the Apache. During the period before the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Tucson was according to Sheridan, "a unique bi-cultural and bi-ethnic" town.

Historian Manuel G. Gonzales, in his book *Mexicanos*, notes that "The most lucrative economic endeavor in the 1860s and 1870s was long-distance freighting. ... Tucson was ideally suited to service both the pueblos of Sonora ... and the New Mexican settlements along the Rio Grande."

Tucson blossomed in the 1870s. By 1880 Tucson's population exceeded seven thousand, with 70% Mexican.

The coming of the railroad in 1880 reoriented most of the major commercial routes through Tucson from north and south to east and west. This effectively ended the lucrative wagon freighting connection

with Mexico and stimulated a mining boom in southern Arizona that required enormous amounts of capital from East and West Coast business interests. Historian Gonzales wrote that, “The advent of corporate capitalism spelled disaster for the Mexican entrepreneurs of Tucson.” Tucson was changing from an agricultural economy to an urban center.

The Mexican population of the Arizona Territory was overwhelmed by the huge influx of newcomers from the East. These Anglos were less tolerant of cultural diversity than their predecessors and realized that there was less to gain by cultivating good relations with Mexicans.

After a decade of economic depression in the 1880s – with a significant decline in population - and a decade of recovery in the 1890s, the population of Tucson had recovered to just over 7,500, but the percentage of Mexicans had dropped to 45%.

Anthropologist Sheridan summed up the situation as Tucson approached the end of the nineteenth century, “[Mexican business people] found themselves serving one segment – the Mexican one – of a society growing more and more dualized, and more and more segregated, with each passing year.”

### **Influential Mexican Pioneers**

**Jesús Maria Eliás (1829-1896)** was born in Tubac to a family long prominent in Sonora. He was a rancher and farmer and was also active as a tracker and Indian fighter, having lost six members of his family to Apache raiders. He served as an army guide in 1863 in a successful attack on Apaches in Aravaipa Canyon, and was the leader of the 1871 Camp Grant Massacre where a group of vigilantes from Tucson annihilated a group of peaceful Apaches, mostly woman, children, and elders. Eliás served in three Territorial Legislatures as a representative from Tucson and Pima County.

**Pedro Aguirre (1835-1907)** was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, one of three brothers whose father in 1852 set them up in Las Cruces, New Mexico in a freighting business along the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and New Mexico. The brothers moved to Arizona in the late 1850s to start a freighting business from Tucson to Yuma and Sonora. While American mining was developing along the border with Mexico, in 1870 Pedro Aguirre started the Arizona & Sonora Stage Line in Tucson to carry mail and passengers between Tucson and Altar, Sonora Mexico, with connections southward to the Sonoran capital, Hermosillo, and the important Gulf of California port at Guaymas. The Aguirre brothers also entered the livestock business, running thousands of head of cattle from Casa Grande to Sasabe. Pedro Aguirre established a ranch west of Arivaca that now is the headquarters of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. He also helped establish the Arivaca Land and Cattle Company.

**Estévan Ochoa (1831-1888)**, was “The most respected of the Arizona traders,” according to historian Gonzales. Ochoa was born in Chihuahua, like the Aguirre brothers, and for a while partnered with them in trading along the Santa Fe Trail. Ochoa came to Tucson in 1860 and partnered with Anglo Pinckney Randolph Tully in a freighting business that became the most successful and one of the largest freighting firms in Arizona. Company operations extended to Kansas and included retail stores in Tucson and surrounding towns. Mining, sheep raising, and stagecoach lines also contributed to Ochoa’s fortune. During the Civil War and the occupation of Tucson by Confederate forces, Ochoa left Tucson rather than

swear allegiance to the Confederacy, expressing instead his steadfast loyalty to the country to which he had immigrated. After the war, Ochoa returned to Tucson to resume his businesses. Estévan Ochoa was a generous philanthropist and an influential community leader, encouraging public education and other civic improvements. Ochoa represented Pima County in three Arizona Territorial Legislatures, and was elected as Tucson's mayor in 1875, the only Mexican to hold the position in Arizona's territorial period. Historian Gonzales wrote about the effect of the railroad on Ochoa's operations, "The arrival of the locomotive brought the collapse of his freighting empire and cost him his fortune, but it did not diminish Don Estévan's immense popularity with his fellow citizens, Anglo as well as Mexicans." As difficulties began to arise for Tucson's Mexican population, Ochoa helped form the town's first Mexican mutual-aid society.

**Mariano Samaniego (1844-1907)** was born in Bavispe, Sonora into a multi-generation well-to-do family. Before the Gadsden Purchase, Samaniego worked in his widowed mother's mercantile establishment in Mesilla, New Mexico. Then he attended college, graduating from Saint Louis University. Like Pedro Aguirre and Estévan Ochoa before him, Samaniego started a freight line – Samaniego's operating from New Mexico as far east as the Mississippi River. Just before he moved to Tucson in 1869, Samaniego married a daughter of the Aguirre family – thus joining the two influential families. In Tucson Samaniego continued freighting, ran a harness shop, became a cattle rancher, and developed a modern irrigation system. Foreseeing implications of the transcontinental railroad, in 1881 Samaniego sold out his freighting business and concentrated on his other businesses. Records show that in 1887 Samaniego was a member of the Tucson Volunteer Fire Department. From the early 1890s to the early 1900s Samaniego ran his own stagecoach service to Arivaca and Oro Blanco, mining towns south of Tucson. He is acknowledged as the most influential Tucson citizen in the 1890s. He served four terms in the Territorial Assembly, terms on the County Board of Supervisors, Tucson City Council, and as Pima County Assessor. Samaniego was one of the founders of the Hispanic American Alliance, a major Mexican mutual aid society, served on the first Board of Regents for the University of Arizona, and was President of the Arizona Pioneers' Historical Society.

**Leopoldo Carrillo (1836-1890)** was born in Moctezuma, Sonora and moved to Tucson in 1859. Like Ochoa and Samaniego, he was a long-distance freighter for a time. Within ten years Carrillo was one of the most prominent businessmen in Tucson and its most successful urban entrepreneur. He built the first ice cream parlor, bowling alley, two-story building, and the first fired-brick building. He was a member of the first school board and established the Republican Party in Tucson. Carrillo owned several homes, nearly 100 houses that he rented as landlord, a ranch west of the Santa Cruz River and another at Sabino Canyon. The Federal census in 1870 identified Carrillo as the wealthiest person in Tucson. In 1885 Carrillo opened a fabulous public park in Tucson, Carrillo Gardens, with eight acres, featuring three spring-fed ponds with two boats. The Gardens, about a quarter-mile southwest of downtown (at today's S. Main and W. Simpson), had 500 peach trees, 2000 grape vines, 200 quince trees, 60 pomegranate trees, and nine apricot trees. The rose garden was one of the finest in Tucson. The Gardens also had 12 bath houses, a saloon, shooting gallery, restaurant, dancehall, zoo, and circus.

**Carlos Velasco (1837-1914)** was born in Hermosillo, Sonora. He was educated as a lawyer, became a judge in 1857 at the age of 20, and won a seat in the Sonoran legislature two years later. His meteoric political career in Sonora was interrupted by a series of destructive government conflicts and Velasco became a political refugee, forced to flee to the United States in the mid-1860s. He came to Tucson, worked in his brother's general store for a few years, returned to Mexico in the early 1870s, again became disenchanted with the government, and returned to Tucson to stay in 1877. Velasco was an intellectual who soon became a crusader for the rights of Mexicans living in the United States. In 1878 he started a Spanish-language newspaper, *El Fronterizo*, that championed Mexican causes, and lasted for 36 years. In 1894 Velasco was the major founder (supported by Mariano Samaniego and at least 40 other prominent Hispanics) of the Hispanic American Alliance that supported Mexican economic and political objectives.

*Sources: Arizona – A History* (Thomas E. Sheridan, 2012); *Los Tucsonenses – The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854-1941* (Thomas E. Sheridan, 1997); *Mexicanos – A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Manuel G. Gonzales, 1999); *Occupied America – A History of Chicanos* (Rodolfo F. Acuña, 2011); *Tucson Citizen*; *Tucson – The Life and Times of an American City* (C. L. Sonnichsen, 1987); Tucson Territorial Pioneer Project (2008); Wikipedia.