Celebrating Mexican Culture and Lending a Helping Hand
Indiana Harbor’s Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez, 1924-1957
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Scholarship about Latinos in the United States has generally focused on those geographic areas in which they have traditionally showed a greater concentration (the Southwest, New York, Florida). Relatively little work has been done on Latinos in the Midwest, in some of whose cities Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have come together to forge socially cohesive and often politically powerful communities. This study seeks to recover part of the Midwest’s Latino heritage by examining primary sources that provide a vivid portrayal of the collective life of the Latino community of northwest Indiana during the first half of the twentieth century. The records of the East Chicago chapter of the Mutual Aid Society Benito Juárez (MSBJ), an organization that had early chapters in the more important Mexican settlements in the United

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States, are housed in the Latino Collection of the Calumet Regional Archives (CRA) of Indiana University Northwest. The records span the period from the creation of the *mutualidad* in 1924 to its unification with two other societies, in 1956, to form the *Unión Benéfica Mexicana*, which continues to this day. They provide a privileged glance, however fragmentary, at the day-to-day operations of such organizations and are particularly noteworthy when we take into account that from all the many local lodges that existed, only a few left written traces of any significance, and that their preservation is far from common.

The recovery of the MSBJ papers is representative of the vicissitudes typical of records of this nature. In 1974, Arturo Rosales found the records in the hall of the *Unión Benéfica Mexicana* “in a storage room in the basement in total disarray . . . literally rotting away in the cold damp basement.” If such primary sources are scarce, scholarship based on them is practically non-existent. José Rivera points out that, despite the proliferation of fraternal benefit societies, the literature on their rich history is limited and what scholarship does exist concentrates on their role in the Latino struggle for labor and civil rights during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The societies’ more general importance as vehicles to build community and provide social benefits remains little studied. The MSBJ collection helps to address that gap, as the society’s records document in considerable detail a strong commitment to the social welfare of its members and to the preservation of Mexican culture.

Mexicans, long a significant and even dominant presence in the Southwest, began moving to midwestern urban centers in the early 1900s. By 1920, the Mexican presence in the Midwest was clearly noticeable, particularly in Kansas City (4,000), Indiana’s Calumet region (1,920), Chicago (1,200), and Detroit (800). Seventy percent of

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1. The MSBJ records are part of CRA 136, the *Unión Benéfica Mexicana* (UBM) Records of the Calumet Regional Archives, Indiana University Northwest, Gary, Indiana.


3. Arturo Rosales, email to the author, September 19, 2002. Rosales recounts that he asked the building’s bartender if he could put the documents in order and was referred to the next UBM meeting, where he was given permission to take the papers out of the basement.

Mexicans in the Midwest were living in urban centers, and in Indiana, 91 percent of them lived in the cities of Gary and East Chicago. The earliest Mexican immigrants to the Calumet region were attracted by employment opportunities during World War I. They came for jobs as track workers for the railroads, and already in 1916 small colonies of Mexican workers had settled next to the railroad yards. By 1923, more than 57 percent of the employees of the Indiana Harbor Belt Line Railroad were Mexicans—by 1928, more than 64 percent. Companies recruited many of these workers from the packing houses and rail centers in Kansas and Missouri; migrants also found employment in the Calumet region’s meatpacking plants and, later, in the steel industries of Chicago and northwest Indiana.\(^5\)

The origin and development of East Chicago and Gary were closely linked to the expansion of the steel industry from Chicago to the east, along the shore of Lake Michigan. The Great Lakes offered cheap transportation: harbors built along Lake Michigan received iron ore, coal, and limestone, and from there the final products were shipped to markets. Numerous railroads in the region also provided access to excellent industrial facilities, available at reasonable prices.\(^6\) The city of East Chicago, founded in 1881, experienced great industrial and real estate growth until the nationwide depression of 1893 put a halt to development and threatened the plants already in operation. Then in 1901, Inland Steel, the largest independent steel company in the Midwest, made arrangements to locate a plant in Indiana Harbor. The construction of such a vast facility made a profound impression on the local population. The *East Chicago Globe* described the area’s transformation:

> How short a time is necessary to change the face of nature from a rough rumble, studded sand ridges and rush covered swamps, to an even tract suitable for the growth and prosperity of a city . . . .
>
> The machine shop for the new steel mill is now complete. A new depot has been completed by the Lake Shore railway. The new office building of the Inland Steel Company would be a credit to any city, as would also the Harbor hotel, which is a three story

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Inland Steel Company mill, East Chicago, Indiana, 1939. Beginning in 1919, steel industry jobs brought large numbers of Mexican workers and their families to northwest Indiana.

Courtesy, Calumet Regional Archives
Inland quickly became the largest steel company in the Midwest and the largest industry in East Chicago. Its workforce grew from 3,900 in 1914 to 7,000 in 1924.\(^6\)

In the beginning of the twentieth century, East Chicago’s numerous industries employed a large number of European immigrants. In 1910, 53 percent of the city’s population was foreign born, and in 1920 still more than 40 percent. When Congress, in 1921 and 1924, restricted immigration from eastern and southeastern European countries, companies hired African Americans and Mexicans to work in their factories. Historian Powell Moore explains that the Federal Census Bureau’s practice, in 1920 and 1930, of classifying Mexican migrants variously as “foreign-born whites” and as “other races” makes the task of determining their precise number difficult. Regardless, Indiana Harbor quickly became a Mexican *colonia* within East Chicago, housing the densest concentration of Mexicans in the United States. Throughout the 1920s, Inland Steel remained the Midwest’s largest employer of Mexicans, and for the final two years of the decade, it was the greatest single employer of Mexican labor in the nation. Of its 7,000 employees, 30 percent were of Mexican descent—about half of all Mexicans living in East Chicago at the time.\(^6\) Census data show 9,007 Mexicans in Lake County in 1930; 5,343 of them were residents of East Chicago and lived near the Inland Steel plant in an area less than one quarter of one square mile, and another 3,486 Mexicans lived in Gary. The Gary mills also employed large numbers of Mexicans, with 2,000 at work in 1923 at its various plants.\(^10\)

\(^1\)East Chicago *Globe*, September 30, 1921, CRA 167, John Reppa Papers, Calumet Regional Archives.

\(^6\)Moore, *The Calumet Region*, 236.

\(^9\)Ibid., 252.

The steel industry general strike of 1919 brought large-scale Mexican immigration to the area. Nationwide, 365,000 steelworkers went on strike against twelve-hour work days, seven-day weeks, low wages, and inhumane housing conditions. The steel companies sent agents as far as Laredo and El Paso, Texas, to recruit workers as strikebreakers; they hired about 500 Mexicans and 1,000 African Americans.\textsuperscript{11} Many Mexican workers were unaware that they had been recruited as strikebreakers, but when the strike failed, according to historian Juan García, union members blamed Mexicans “and did not welcome [them] into their ranks until the mid-1930s.”\textsuperscript{12} However, during the 1937 strike against steel plants that had refused to recognize the union, Mexican workers made up the majority of demonstrators on the picket lines at East Chicago’s steel plants.\textsuperscript{13} Unionizing had a particular appeal for Mexicans, as they were generally hired to work in the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs.\textsuperscript{14}

The testimony of one Mexican steel mill worker from East Chicago provides a glimpse of how they claimed their own spaces in an otherwise unfriendly workplace:

When the noon whistle blew for lunch, workers went to designated shanties. I went to the labor shanty. Most Mexican workers were heating tacos over an oil drum, punctured with holes and loaded with wood and coke. In no time they were ready. In this happy half hour, everyone became an advisor, politician, preacher or Casanova. They discussed everything, but their favorite subject was women. Most of the conversation was in Spanish.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11}García, Mexicans in the Midwest, 39.

\textsuperscript{12}Juan R. García and Angel Cal, “El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José, 1925 to 1930,” in Forging a Community, eds. Lane and Escobar, 96.

\textsuperscript{13}Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, “Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana, 1919-1945,” in Forging a Community, eds. Lane and Escobar, 151-52.

\textsuperscript{14}Ramón Arredondo and Trisha Hull Arredondo, María’s Journey (Indianapolis, Ind., 2010), esp. chap. 7. The book tells the story of a large Mexican family, including patriarch Miguel Arredondo who originally migrated to Indiana Harbor to work in the steel mill. Miguel was a longtime labor organizer at Inland Steel, and one of his sons became the first Hispanic president of the steelworkers’ local chapter.

Like other immigrants to the Midwest, Mexicans faced many new challenges beyond the workplace. They soon realized the advantages of banding together and helping each other through the changes in their lives. While this help sometimes came in the form of neighbors extending a helping hand to each other, in other cases it was linked to the emergence of mutual aid societies. In northwest Indiana, as in many other parts of the country, Mexicans came together to provide for themselves the social safety net that they could not find in existing American institutions. In this endeavor, mutual aid societies played a significant role in the Mexican community, as they had for other immigrant groups.

Fraternal orders and benefit organizations promoted physical, financial, cultural, and emotional well-being. Some of the new immigrants were probably already familiar with the mutual aid societies that operated in Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, part of a huge increase throughout that country of private clubs and fraternal societies. Most of the societies in the U.S., according to José Hernández, started “as gatherings of men and women well-known in the community. Some of the societies began also as secessions from some earlier order, for one reason or another”; the groups often competed with each other in the services they offered. Fraternal groups were also popular among African Americans and immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. According to historian David Beito, in the early twentieth century, even by conservative estimates, one out of every three U.S. adult males was a member of such a group, with a higher representation among the working class. Aid distributed by the government and by charities during these decades was minimal, and it carried the stigma of inferiority. In contrast, fraternal aid was perceived as help among equals; donors and recipients often came from similar walks of life, and today’s donor could be tomorrow’s recipient.

The constitutions and by-laws of the societies regulated their scope of benefits, membership eligibility and duties, governance, assessment structure, and overall purposes. New members of the MSBJ received a brochure containing the by-laws in order to clarify their obligations and

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The help promised in these documents came at the individual, family, and local community levels, and could include payments and contributions to members in need, donations to outside persons, assistance in sickness, accident cases during times of natural catastrophes, contribution to community welfare drives, donations to special population segments in need such as

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18Rivera, *Mutual Aid Societies in the Hispanic Southwest*, 13; Elder Flores and H. R. Silva to MSBJ, October 1946, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

Mexican family at Neighborhood House, Gary, 1939. Protestant settlement houses reached out to Mexican migrants with mixed results. In contrast, Mexican mutual aid societies attracted greater loyalties in northwest Indiana's colonias by providing families with insurance, legal counsel, benefits for injured and sick workers, and social programs that kept them connected to Mexican culture.

*Courtesy, Calumet Regional Archives*
the aged and orphaned children, and sponsorship of special patriotic events.¹⁹

Fraternal groups functioned as a composite of benefit society, charity organization, and ethno-cultural club, with the significance of each element varying depending on the society and time period.

Group benefits covered different aspects of members’ lives, from the cultural and linguistic to health services, low-cost insurance, and legal counsel. In exchange for a moderate monthly fee, members gained access to benefits which were otherwise out of their reach. Typical sick benefits, for example, consisted of the payment of bills for doctors and medicine, and a small amount of money per day after the first week of illness.²⁰ This sort of coverage must have been a necessity for Mexican workers employed in the steel mills, where safety precautions were virtually nonexistent and accidents were common—workers could be crushed by heavy equipment or burned by hot steel.²¹ In addition, many of the region’s factory workers were plagued with illness and unsafe living conditions. At a time when a worker’s incapacity or sickness meant poverty for the family, society benefits brought much-needed temporary relief. In Indiana Harbor alone, about 400 Mexicans died between 1923 and 1929 as a result of illness, work-related accidents, or acts of violence. Because their living quarters were interspersed among a maze of railroad tracks and streetcar lines, many workers died after being struck by passing trains.²² The provision of life insurance was another major service of fraternal mutual aid. By 1920, societies carried over $9 billion worth of life insurance, and the lodges also dominated the field of health insurance.²³

Particularly in their earlier years, many of the mutual aid societies functioned as what Hernández has called “protopolitical organizations,”

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¹⁹Rivera, Mutual Aid Societies in the Hispanic Southwest, 14-15.
²⁰Taylor, “Mexican Labor in the Calumet Region,” 50.
²¹In 1907, muckraking journalist William B. Hard published a detailed and influential exposé of working conditions in U.S. Steel’s Chicago South Works. See “Making Steel and Killing Men,” Everybody’s Magazine 17 (November 1907), 579-91.
²²Arredondo and Arredondo, María’s Journey. In the Arredondo family, one of María’s sons lost a finger while cleaning a malfunctioning motor; her brother was run over by a train on his way back to work on the railroad and lost an arm; and her husband was killed by a passing train.
²³Beito, From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State, 2-3.
which fought discriminatory practices and defended the legal and civil rights of their members. Mexicans who immigrated to the Gary-East Chicago area early in the twentieth century had to face not only the hardships of poverty but also the consequences of discriminatory practices. At work, discrimination prevented access to specialized, better-paying jobs; in the cities, landlords restricted Mexican tenants to specific neighborhoods, leading to serious overcrowding and lack of protection against owners’ speculation. Mexicans were also denied entrance to some theatres, and they repeatedly fell victim to police abuse and discriminatory treatment. Fraternal societies denounced abuse and discrimination and sometimes functioned as political organisms to defend the rights of the Mexican population.

Fraternal societies also assumed an important socio-cultural role. Mutualistas brought the community together by sponsoring holiday celebrations, cultural programs, lectures and concerts, sporting events, and educational forums. They eased the anxiety of the newly arrived immigrant, who through them could find a community that spoke Spanish, observed the traditional Mexican festivals and holidays, provided information, assisted in finding jobs and housing, and was sensitive to their fears and concerns. Most of the organizations in northwest Indiana “whatever their primary purpose, maintained some social activities, usually occasional dances; some combined social and athletic, or cultural and athletic activities.” All of the societies in the region urged members to maintain and take pride in their cultural and linguistic ties with Mexico, putting particular effort into the celebration of major Mexican national holidays. Such celebrations appealed to Mexicans because many did not intend to live in the U.S. permanently and therefore were invested in keeping alive strong ties with the homeland. The character and scope of the goals of Mexican fraternal organizations seems to have changed with time. After the 1930s, as members’ social situation

24Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 129.
25Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten, “Discrimination and Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary,” in Forging a Community, eds. Lane and Escobar, 111.
28García and Cal, “El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José,” 103.
improved, societies became “more like fraternal lodges that simply collect fees from members, return scanty payments in sickness and death benefits, and provide a social life for the convivial element of the active membership.” 29

The Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez first appears on record in a census report on the insurance business. It is identified as the Sociedad Benito Juárez de Auxilios Mutuos, organized and incorporated in 1878 with a principal office in Brownsville, Texas, and a membership consisting mainly of Mexican American mechanics. 30 This original organization was related to the one by the same name that emerged in northwest Indiana coincidental with the arrival of the first Mexicans who came to the region to work for the railroad companies. Hernández describes the group’s beginning in Indiana:

29Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 129.
In 1917 the popular Benito Juárez Society appeared in the Chicago-Gary Region. This mutualista, organized by Chicano railroad workers in the district, provided group insurance for sickness and accidents. The member paid $2 each month, but the benefits were many; $100 for the loss of arm, foot, or eye, and $40 per month for a maximum of six months. When the member was absent from work because of illness, he would receive $1 per day after the first week of illness. The maximum sick leave period was six months. Coverage also included doctor fees.\[^{31}\]

Though we learn about the existence of a Benito Juárez Society in the region as early as 1917, the official Mutual Aid Society Benito Juárez was not formally founded at Indiana Harbor until May 18, 1924. Extant records offer only indirect testimony of the society’s foundation. In a personal letter dated June 14, 1947, Salvador Calderón, one of its founders, writes that:

[The] Society will very soon turn twenty four years since its foundation, and the 16th of September of 1923 has not left my mind, when for the first time we Mexicans organized and marched in a parade through the main streets of that city of East Chicago, carrying our Blessed and Glorious National Flag.\[^{32}\]

According to some accounts, Inland Steel actively encouraged its Mexican workers to form a fraternal society, following the path of other minorities in the mill.\[^{33}\] Just two years after the society’s formal establishment, a group of members dissatisfied with the extent of benefits broke away and formed the Sociedad José María Morelos. In 1928, a Sociedad Femenina Mexicana was also organized in affiliation with the Benito Juárez Society.\[^{34}\]

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\[^{31}\] Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 75.

\[^{32}\] Calderón Camiña to MSBJ, June 14, 1947, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

\[^{33}\] Author interview with Oscar Sánchez and Daniel López, September 20, 2011.

\[^{34}\] Taylor, “Mexican Labor in the Calumet Region,” 53. Eleven years after the creation of the MSBJ in Texas, in 1899 a sister organization for women named Sociedad Benito Juárez de Señoras y Señoritas (apparently coed) appeared in San Antonio. There are no records of a similar group in the Midwest.
The Great Depression dealt a hard blow to Indiana’s Mexican community. With steel production practically at a halt, Mexicans—the most recent and least trained members of the work force—were the first workers to lose their jobs.35 “By the early 1930s,” García records, “one out of every ten Mexicans formerly employed in iron and steel manufacturing was unemployed.”36 Many left the Midwest voluntarily, but as the Depression worsened, governmental and private groups in the U.S. increasingly coerced them to repatriate. East Chicago and Gary saw random sweeps and arrests that were common in border states, but rare elsewhere in the Midwest, including Chicago.37 An estimated half of East Chicago’s Mexican population was forced to return to Mexico.38 The Depression devastated the young mutual aid organizations, destroying most of the societies that had flourished in the twenties, as thousands of workers stopped paying dues and dropped out. This loss was related not only to members’ financial insolvency but also to mergers between societies.39 With the disappearance of so many organizations, the remaining societies sponsored far fewer cultural events. The celebration of Mexican Independence Day, the cultural event of the year, went from being a mass community event to small gatherings of families in private homes.

After World War II, the steel industry enjoyed again another period of prosperity that revived Mexican communities, and as more Mexicans were drawn to the region, they re-established their mutual aid societies.40 Membership never reached the pre-1929 level, but the same was true for fraternal groups all around the country. After the Social Security Act became law in 1935, government welfare programs began

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39 Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*, 223-24. A study of unemployed families in Chicago during the first years of the Depression shows that 75 percent let some or all insurance policies lapse. Nationwide, from 1930 to 1935, the number of lodges in the United States dropped 20 percent.
Membership form for the Mutual Aid Society Benito Juárez, East Chicago, Indiana, 1943. Fifty-seven extant applications provide information—including age, birthplace, residence, marital status, and occupation—about the society’s members.

Courtesy, Calumet Regional Archives
to provide some of the services typically associated with mutual aid societies. By the early 1940s, according to Beito, “the societies were in full retreat as social welfare institutions. Conviviality or life insurance, instead of mutual aid, became the order of the day.”

The information that we have about the membership of the MSBJ comes from the forms that people filled out when joining the organization. These forms provide valuable demographic information: gender, place of residence, place of origin, age, year of birth, marital status, occupation, health condition, and workplace. We know from one of the documents that by 1948 the society’s membership totaled three hundred and thirty-one, with an additional twenty-one honorary members. The preserved records, however, contain only fifty-seven applications, all from men. Fifty-three men (93 percent) lived in East Chicago, five in Gary, and one in Chicago. Forty-one of the men (71.9 percent) were married. Forty-nine men (86 percent) had been born in Mexico, seven in the United States (two in Texas, two in Indiana, three in other states), and one in Australia. Only five of the members were under thirty years of age, thirteen (23.2 percent) between thirty-one and forty, and thirty-four (60.7 percent) between forty-one and fifty years old. Members’ ages reflect the time in life at which families become more established and more actively involved in communal life; they probably also reflect growing concern with health issues.

Members were asked to appoint a beneficiary at the time of joining. Of the fifty-three who answered this question, forty-two (73 percent) appointed a beneficiary who resided in East Chicago, seven chose beneficiaries from nearby cities or from other states, and four designated people in Mexico. Thus, most of these men were rooted in their communities; their closest social networks were local. When asked about their health condition, all fifty-seven applicants claimed “good health.” Since health-related expenses were some of the benefits afforded to members, the preferred new member would have been a healthy one. When asked about the lapse of time since they had experienced health problems, only four applicants reported a period of weeks or months since their last illness. Fifteen (26 percent) did not respond to

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41 Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*, 231.
42 Membership forms, Sociedad Mutualista “Benito Juarez,” folder 9, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
the question, and the rest stated either that it had been years since their last health complication or that they had “never” had one. Asked to provide the name of the family doctor, thirty-one (54.4 percent) did so, while twenty-four (42.1 percent) did not, presumably because the family was not seeing a physician with any regularity.

Fifty-four members answered the questions on workplace and occupation. The local steel industry employed forty-six men (85 percent)—thirty-nine worked at Inland Steel and the other seven at Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, Gary Works, and Carnegie-Illinois Steel. Two men worked for railroad companies (Elgin Joliet and Easter Railroad, and Monon Central Railroad), and the rest for a variety of businesses, including a laundry, and a cement plant. Steel workers listed occupations including boilermaker, electric operator, hostler, pipe liner, millwright, blacksmith, cutter, table operator, and third helper; alternately, they used
general descriptions such as worker, laborer, steelworker, or operator. All of the men could be classified as blue-collar workers, although some seem to have worked at more specialized jobs than others.

Spanish was the dominant language among the society's members. Almost all of the records in the MSBJ collection were written in the language, and it was the required language within the society until 1991, when the Unión Benefica Mexicana changed the regulation to allow the use of English for those who did not feel comfortable speaking Spanish. This mandatory use of Spanish, however, should not suggest a lack of proficiency in members' English skills. A survey conducted by Paul Taylor in the 1920s revealed that about 91 percent of Mexicans in Chicago and the Calumet region spoke English. Based upon the Spanish used in the collection’s documents, the level of members’ education varied considerably—some of the documents are plagued with spelling and grammatical errors, while others display elegant discourse.

The account of the MSBJ that appears below uses archival materials organized around the purposes and goals of the society. In all, the documents portray the life of a vibrant Mexican society, relevant to the life of its community and representative—in its composition, purpose, and internal structure—of the many Hispanic and non-Hispanic ethno-linguistic societies that sprang up early in the twentieth century as new immigrants started their lives in the United States.

Mutual aid societies organized programs and activities that celebrated Mexican culture and reinforced the Mexican American community's adherence to traditional cultural values, such as the importance of the family, hard work, honesty, cooperation, and love of country. Far removed from the well-established Mexican communities of the Southwest, midwestern societies placed greater emphasis on the maintenance and celebration of Mexican identity and culture. These groups promoted celebrations, parades, and festivals as a way to fortify the community against growing anti-Mexican sentiment. The MSBJ collection contains invitations to celebratory events, thank-you letters, notes accepting and declining invitations, letters detailing entertainment arrangements, and personal testimonies. Much of the collaboration and

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43 Garcia, Mexicans in the Midwest, 73.
44 Ibid., 148.
45 Arredondo, Mexican Chicago, 9-10.
correspondence among the different Mexican mutual aid organizations related to the planning of social events celebrating Mexican holidays or cultural performances of interest to the wider Mexican community. The most important events in the social life of the colonia were the Mexican patriotic festivities, such as Cinco de Mayo, Mexican Flag Day (February 24), and Mexican Independence Day (September 16). These celebrations kept alive traditional symbols and images and fostered the idea of a common cultural, linguistic, and historic heritage. In the early 1920s, festivities were simple and usually private in nature, but by mid-decade, all of the societies came together two or three months prior to September 16 and elected a Junta Patriótica (patriotic council), composed of the leaders of the different societies and clubs who then took charge of the festivities. The societies sponsored an Independence Day dance throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, as evidenced by correspondence with local entertainment bands. For Cinco de Mayo, the organizations sponsored literary-musical soirées in which members from each society gave patriotic speeches, recited poetry, and offered various musical numbers. Documents also make clear that by the 1920s, Mexicans had acquired a degree of local political influence. In 1926, Raleigh P. Hale, the mayor of East Chicago, showed his support of the Mexican community by officially participating in Las Fiestas Patrias: “At the head of the parade Mayor Hale rode with a police escort . . . . Some 2,500 persons took part in the activities of the day.” The day before, the societies had sponsored a ball attended by 3,500 society members and special guests, including Hale and the Mexican consul of Chicago. The government of Mexico encouraged its consuls to develop organizations to service the Mexican community. The consulates created

*Ciro H. Sepúlveda, “Social Life and Nativism in La Colonia del Harbor,” in Forging a Community, eds. Lane and Escobar, 84.

*Ibid., 83. The MSBJ collection contains numerous invitations to and from different organizations asking for participation in this type of event. For example, in March 1946, the MSBJ invited the Sociedad Mexicana Cuauhtémoc to a musical and literary program in honor of the 140th anniversary of the birth of Benito Juárez; in August 1940, the Sociedad Mutualista México invited members of the MSBJ to a literary evening celebrating Mexican Independence Day. MSBJ to Sociedad Mexicana Cuauhtémoc, March 15, 1946, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records; Sociedad Mutualista México to MSBJ, August 19, 1940, folder 3, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

honorary commissions, which served as liaisons between the consul and the Mexican community and advised the consul on matters pertaining to the community’s welfare. Commission members were community leaders, appointed by the consul who also served as honorary president. The MSBJ records include a copy of the by-laws regulating Mexican honorific commissions, drafted in 1930 by the consular office, as well as copies of correspondence suggesting a strong relationship between the society and the local commission into the 1940s.

The society invited to its events a variety of civic leaders: local mayors, school superintendents, the general superintendent of Inland Steel, Lake County sheriffs, and union district directors (United Steel Workers of America-CIO), among others. The Mexican community’s relationship with the union had, as evidenced by MSBJ invitations, changed considerably since the early years of the century, when Mexican workers were blamed for the failure of the 1919 general strike. The society also offered honorary membership to at least one Inland Steel administrator, who responded:

Some time ago you were kind enough to present me with a lapel button and a certificate as visible evidence that I am an honorary member of your worthy Society. I thought you would like to know that I have been wearing the button regularly, and the impressive looking certificate has been placed in a frame which is now hanging on the wall in my office.

In addition to hosting cultural events, the social halls of mutual aid societies served as training centers for immigrants in democratic practices. Groups held regular meetings, conducted according to Robert’s Rules of Order; members took minutes, elected officers, named official

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50 Copy of the 1930 Consular Office By-laws regulating Mexican Honorific Commissions, 1942, folder 3, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records. By 1948, the honorific commissions seem to have disappeared, for reasons unknown. See José Rodríguez to MSBJ, February 10, 1948, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records, in which the author reminds the society that “it is not the group of Mexican Honorific Commission who is addressing you, because it does not exist.”

51 L. B. Luellen to Elder Flores and H. R. Silva, June 18, 1948, folder 7, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
 delegates to conventions, and wrote their own constitutions and by-laws.\textsuperscript{52} The MSBJ collection reveals elections results, letters of resignation, credential letters, minutes, petitions, and requests for official representation, as well as documents regarding membership rallies, requests for payments, and honorary memberships—ample evidence of an active and effective administrative structure. All board members were volunteers. When one member proposed to the society’s president that board members receive a small token of appreciation for their commitment, he admitted that the idea was quite unpopular among the general membership:

Forgive me for not including my full name in this letter because I fear that, although I have the right as a member, most of them do not agree with my thinking; however, I think it is fair as a thank-you, to suggest that the members of the Board receive a gift of no more than $10 or $15 for each person who was working last year; we ask a lot of them without thinking that the society doesn’t pay them anything, not even to the president, secretary, and treasurer.\textsuperscript{53}

The society regularly extended credentials to members who attended a variety of cultural events as representatives of the MSBJ. The abundance of such documents points to a close collaboration among Mexican organizations in the region. In general terms, the success of the fraternal orders was linked to “dedicated and well-disciplined” male and female leaders who acted, according to Hernández, as “practical organizers. They built organizations on issues that were considered of prime importance by the membership and that were easily obtainable.”\textsuperscript{54}

The MSBJ also functioned as a community arbitrator, acting as an advisory council for the Mexican community and representing members when social disputes arose. In one letter from the collection, the East Chicago superintendent of schools invited the MSBJ to send a representative to a workshop devoted to discussing “significant racial likenesses

\textsuperscript{52}Author interview with Oscar Sánchez and Daniel López, September 20, 2011.

\textsuperscript{53}Mr. C. F. to MSBJ, undated, folder 7, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

\textsuperscript{54}Hernández, \textit{Mutual Aid for Survival}, 129.
and differences as anthropologists see them.” The organizing committee
on “Intercultural Understanding in the local schools” presumably
included the MSBJ to represent the local Mexican community and voice
its members’ concerns regarding intercultural relationships in schools.55

The society appears also to have acted as an occasional intermedi-
ary between their members and religious organizations, including
Roman Catholic parish churches. One account in the records tells of a
group of community leaders who wanted to start a Boy Scout troop in an
East Chicago church. The parish priest, opposed to the idea, blocked
their request: “Father Kennelly told them that the parish already had the
YCW [Young Christian Workers]. Unsatisfied, they went to the Juarez
Society and made a Sunday appointment to explain the benefits.”56 The
fact that the priest in question was Irish may have contributed to the
appeal to the MSBJ. Mexican parishioners often felt that their wishes and
their cultural preferences were unacknowledged or even disparaged by
parish priests and the clerical hierarchy, all of whom had come from a
European Catholicism.57

There is no evidence in the MSBJ collection as to any religious affil-
iation of the group; oral histories from leaders of the Unión Benéfica
Mexicana indicate that both the Sociedad Benito Juárez and the Sociedad
Cuauhtémoc had Masonic ties.58 Northwest Indiana did have one reli-
giously based Mexican mutual aid society, the Circulo de Obreros
Católicos San José, created to promote Catholic ideals and dedicated to
building a local Mexican Catholic church to “defend the Catholic faith,
especially against the encroachment of Baptist missionaries.”59 The

55A.C. Senour to MSBJ, May 17, 1946, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
57On ethnic conflicts within Catholic parishes, see Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds.,
Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965 (Notre Dame, Ind., 1994).
58Author interview with Oscar Sánchez and Daniel López, September 20, 2011. Benito Juárez
was a thirty-third degree Mason and served as Sovereign Inspector General of the Mexican
National Rite. In Mexico, Freemasonry was popular at the time of independence, and it came
into conflict with the Catholic Church, which blamed Masons for the armed revolt. See, for
example, Virginia Gue dea, “The Process of Mexican Independence,” American Historical
59García, Mexicans in the Midwest, 166. By the early 1920s, Protestants—Baptists,
Presbyterians, and Methodists—in Chicago and the Calumet region were proselytizing among
M exicans who were discontented with the American Catholic church. Mexican liberals, already
Obreros considered themselves well educated and offered programs such as literary events and lectures. The organization maintained a complicated relationship with other regional societies; many of its members lived outside the colonia, and they were often perceived as snobbish and condescending by other Mexicans, who claimed that the Obreros “berated their countrymen for their poor hygiene, poverty, illiteracy, and lack of cooperation.”

While they sometimes acted as mediators in times of conflict, fraternal aid societies were not free of turmoil. In 1946, a member received permission “to compare the List of Deposits and Expenditures regarding sales on the Canteen, with the list that remains in possession of the Ex-Commissioner of the Canteen, Mr. Francisco Velazquez, with the purpose of finding out whether there was embezzlement in this area.” One year later, perhaps in a related incident, one of the trustees presented his resignation, explaining that “there was a person accusing me of covering up what was happening in the Society,” and adding that “I am very sensitive about issues like these, and I cannot possibly accept to remain in the position of Trustee.”

Members’ misconduct must at times have put the society at risk, but harsh economic times posed a greater risk still. In 1947, the society appealed to its members to pay off the debt on the group’s new building: “We arrived at the conclusion that any member who had the means, should give a loan of $10 to the Society for an indefinite amount of time, either to be reimbursed later or as a donation. The only purpose of this loan is to pay off the debt of the building.”

In good times and bad, the society needed to add new members. They organized recruiting rallies, offered honorary memberships, and established an auxiliary for women. The MSBJ collection includes an undated petition, signed by seventy-nine youngsters, for a teenage group auxiliary:

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critical of the church, worked with the Protestant groups, especially in the area of community education. At least one Mexican Baptist church operated in Indiana Harbor, as evidenced by the Spanish-language Baptist publication El Evangelista. See, for example, El Evangelista, May 12, 26, June 16, 1935, box 2, CRA 273, Nicolas Kanellos Papers, Calumet Regional Archives.

60Garcia and Cal, “El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José,” 105.
61Félix Canamar and Jesus Gómez Salas to Salvador Tristain, Aureliano Maguáleño, Jose Nuñez, and Juan Baturoni, May 27, 1946, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
62Felipe Ramírez to MSBJ, August 30, 1947, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
63Emilio Reyes Perez and Isidro R. Daniel to Aniceto Castañeda, May 8, 1944, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
We the Mexican Youth of Indiana Harbor, being in the State of inactivity at the present would like to petition the Benito Juarez for sponsorship of a Teenage group; naming it the Benito Juarez Junior Club. Our purpose being to unite the young people for betterment of our race and prestige.  

Young Mexican Americans saw the organizations as a venue to express their hopes for a better future and to improve their social status in the wider community.

The MSBJ and other benefit societies performed benevolent work at the community, family, and individual levels. The society's records contain evidence of charitable contributions to national organizations including the American Red Cross and the Infantile Paralysis Fund; donations to meet the needs of the local Mexican population; fundraising contributions to other mutual aid societies; and payments and assistance to members in need. Though attending occasionally to the needs of the general population, mutual aid societies focused on the Mexican community. Mexicans did not rely on American charities to the same extent as other nationalities, but rather organized themselves for their own benefits. One Gary executive noted that “Mexicans are not such a [charity] problem for us. They take care of themselves pretty well.” Fraternal societies often sought help for underprivileged Mexican children. A request from the “Chicago Pro-Christmas Committee for the Mexican Child” asked members to contribute toys, sweets, fruit, clothing, or money for the poor children of the local Mexican colony. In another case, Robert G. Estill, a local attorney who often worked for the MSBJ, sent a letter seeking the group’s cooperation in finding Mexican families to welcome in their homes Mexican children who would other-

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64 Petition for a Teenage Group, Indiana Harbor, undated, folder 8, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
65 Rivera, Mutual Aid Societies in the Hispanic Southwest, 14.
67 Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 86.
68 Maria G. de Mejia and Jesus V. Herrera to MSBJ, December 5, 1940, folder 3, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
wise have to be placed in institutions or in group homes. A Hull House social worker expressed surprise that “Mexicans are awfully kind to each other. Even with a home full of children, they will take in another family.” Some mutualistas sponsored educational services for children; for example, Los Obreros offered classes for Mexican children, and in 1929 Benito Juárez sponsored “a school for all ages under the tutelage of a Mexican instructor.”

The MSBJ, of course, like other fraternal organizations, operated primarily because of the benefits its members enjoyed. Health benefits constituted one important category. Sometimes the societies sponsored special collections, usually for relief in case of illness or death. One member, just admitted into the hospital, wrote to the society informing them of his situation; another member wrote “to let you know that I have received a check for twenty-four dollars, in benefit for the time I was sick, and I send you a heartfelt thank you.” At other times, the organization provided emotional support in trying times, as attested in numerous letters of acknowledgement and thanks. As noted earlier, sick coverage must have been a necessity for Mexicans employed in the steel mills. In 1910, social reformer Margaret Byington estimated that “57 percent of the male heads of families who worked in the steel mills” in Homestead, Pennsylvania, were members of mutual aid societies. Even in the group who was earning “less than ‘a living wage,’” 46.8 percent of the male workers belonged to fraternal societies. Byington attributed this high percentage to the need for protection against physical risks: “Given the constant peril of accident or death and a community which takes little interest in the immigrant’s welfare, the extent to which the lodge has been developed is not surprising.”

Legal protection was another one of the primary incentives for joining mutual aid societies. The MSBJ played an important role in handling legal matters that affected the Mexican community, and the society offered practical instruction for adult members. Estill suggested that the

69 Robert G. Estill to MSBJ, October 23, 1944, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
70 Quoted in Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 86.
71 García, Mexicans in the Midwest, 167-68.
72 Agustin Ortiz to MSBJ President, January 29, 1944, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
73 Beito, From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State, 23. The original study is Margaret F. Byington, Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town (New York), 1910.
society should publicize laws of particular interest to the community—such as the mandatory purchase of car insurance—and he volunteered to offer “one lecture a month, free of charge, where we could discuss the different laws in force.”74 Attorneys Estill, Harold Helbling, and Richard Kaplan appear frequently in collection documents regarding a variety of legal matters, ranging from the expiration of one member’s residence permit to another’s violent death. In all these cases, the society paid the legal fees. Correspondence between the MSBJ and Kaplan, for example, speaks of the society’s unsuccessful efforts to prosecute a man who had caused a member’s death. Kaplan wrote: “I have just received … a complete report of the action taken by the Grand Jury in the Refugio Miramonte case, and find that the Grand Jury refuses to indict Louis S. Fernando, the man who is charged with the death of Refugio Miramonte… the Grand Jury found that it was an accidental death and refused to indict the man.”75 In a later letter, the attorney acknowledged receipt of $50.00 in compensation for his services: “Although the amount is smaller than I thought it would be. . . . I told the officers of your society that I would accept what you thought was fair and this is perfectly alright with me.”76 In another case, MSBJ’s attorneys discussed the strategy to follow in a member’s defense: “I believe we should have as many members as possible present at the trial. . . . It is important for this Society that we sustain in the trial the prestige of our organization.”77 Attorneys intended to use the man’s membership in the society as proof of his good moral character, an indication of the group’s standing in the wider community. In yet another case, a member’s residency permit was the legal issue at hand: “Although my return has been hindered by the expiration of the permit that I had. . . . I wish that with the help of my Society and all its members, I could return for the stated purposes. . . . Mr. President, please give my regards to Mr. Still, the lawyer, and I hope he can help me to arrange my return.”78

74Robert G. Estill and Harold J. Helbling to MSBJ, June 1, 1948, folder 7, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
75Richard S. Kaplan to Elder Flores, October 17, 1946, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
76Richard S. Kaplan to Elder Flores, October 24, 1946, folder 6, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
78Pedro Jimenez to E. Reyes Perez, February 16, 1945, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
Members turned to the MSBJ when facing challenges to their lives and livelihood; however, the efficacy of these organizations—in this and other areas—was always compromised by their limited human and financial resources. The sums collected from dues were small, and the needs of the members many and multi-faceted. This gulf between needed assistance and available resources strained and destabilized these modest community organizations, many of which could not survive for long. The MSBJ’s 1946 member recruitment campaign fulfilled a double purpose: “to count on as many members as possible, for the development of future activities, what will mean the moral and material progress of the Society” and to replenish the society’s welfare fund.79

In Chicago and the Calumet region, Mexican community leaders frequently came into conflict with the police concerning arbitrary raids and arrests in the Mexican colonias. The Mexican consulate dealt with cases of breach of due process and with the civil rights claims of Mexicans, who were often confined to the poorest housing and suffered discrimination in public businesses.80 In many cases, the consulate was unable to help due to lack of resources. In areas without a local consular office, including the Calumet region, the honorary commissions were charged with reporting instances of discrimination, exploitation, or abuse to the nearest consul. Commission members were leaders of the Mexican community; many were also the leaders of the local mutual aid societies. In this way, according to Juan García, these organizations emerged as quasi-official bodies assisting the consuls: “They were also asked to take statements concerning work-related accidents; assign representatives to visit jails, hospitals, schools, and work camps; plan and attend educational conferences; and assist in sponsoring patriotic festivals.”81 Once again, the success of these collaborations was compromised by the lack of financial support.

Paul Taylor counted, for the year 1928, twelve active Mexican mutual aid societies in East Chicago and Gary.82 The proliferation of societies

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79 Ibid.
80 García, Mexicans in the Midwest, 111, 117.
81 Ibid., 125.
82 Taylor notes that the list is not exhaustive. In East Chicago he recorded (the year in parenthesis refers to the date of foundation, when available): Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez
indicated, as García and Angel Cal later suggested, “the desire of people to group themselves with others who shared common interests, backgrounds and concerns . . . . The number and variety of organizations reflected the heterogeneity of the community and its desire for self-improvement.”83 Organizations routinely cooperated in planning and sponsoring major celebrations and events. For example, a group of societies formed the “Committee Pre-Edifice” to investigate purchasing a building that would house a Mexican community center. The committee sent out an appeal for “the co-operation of every Mexican individual, society, club, and organization. This community center is not only for our benefit but also in the future for our children and our children’s children.”84 Other documents present a project in which the MSBJ and the Mexican Society Cuauhtémoc looked to purchase a building together. The organizations formed a commission and discussed the different purchasing options.85 On a more modest scale, societies with relatively large meeting spaces often offered their facilities to other mutual aid societies for special events. The society Mexico in Gary agreed to let the MSBJ use their assembly hall and canteen free of charge and pledged their assistance “in every way possible to make sure that the party will be a success . . . . We have the strongest commitment to helping you in every way possible.”86

Into the 1930s, the societies’ memberships ranged from twenty to one hundred and twenty, although most groups were closer to the lower

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(1924); Sociedad Mutualista Cuauhtémoc (1925); Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José (1924); Sociedad Jose María Morelos (1926); Sociedad Femenina Mexicana (1928; affiliated with Sociedad Benito Juárez); Mutualistas Hijos de México (1928); Comisión Honorífica (1926); Cruz Azul (1921); Sociedad Santa Cruz; Club de los 13; Club Deportivo Internacional; Feminil “Tesoro del Hogar.” In Gary, Taylor recorded the following: Sociedad Josefa Ortiz Domínguez (1928); Sociedad Hidalgo (1928); Mutualistas Caballeros de Guadalupe (1928 or earlier); Hijas de María (1928 or earlier). Two additional societies which had existed earlier were inactive by 1928: Pro Patria (1922, disbanded in 1923) and Sociedad Protectora Mexicana (1921-1926). Paul Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States, vol. 7: Chicago and the Calumet Region (Berkeley, Cal., 1928), 131. To this list, Garcia added East Chicago chapters of La Cruz Mexicana and La Comisión Honorífica, as well as La Sociedad Bautista de Jóvenes Mexicanos, a Baptist society for young men. Garcia, Mexicans in the Midwest, 171-72.

*Garcia and Cal, “El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José,” 106.

**Fred Flores to Mexican Society Cuauhtémoc, folder 8, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

***Commission report, April 11, 1948, folder 7, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.

****Francisco Cadena and Francisco Lara to MSBJ, January 30, 1941, folder 3, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
MSBJ social event program, October 1942. Mexican mutual aid organizations sponsored get-togethers ranging from literary soirées to large-scale community parties and balls, replete with music, recitations, and speeches.

Courtesy, Calumet Regional Archives
Each organization seemed to appeal to a specific part of the Mexican community. For example, as noted earlier, the Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José in East Chicago had a reputation as an elitist group, given to sponsoring middle-class activities that did not appeal to the larger Mexican community. Los Obreros had sought to establish a confederation of the Mexican organizations of Indiana Harbor, but the societies could not reach agreement on the form and content of a confederation and other groups suspected that Los Obreros sought to consolidate their leadership in the community through unification.\(^8^7\) In a similar fashion, Mexican workers in Chicago refused to join that city’s Benito Juárez Society because they did not identify with the “middle-class makeup of the club’s leadership.” Members of the Sociedad Cuauhtémoc, mostly Indians from Michoacán, took pride in their organization’s membership consisting mainly of the working-class “less educated members of the colony.”\(^8^8\) Some of the tensions that arose among societies, and which prevented further consolidation of these groups, arose from differences in social class, religious practices, and each group’s power and influence in the community. Their Mexicanidad brought them together, but the construction of a specific identity within that broad category made them different.

Contact between societies was constant and the relationship among them quite cordial. They collaborated closely in the events they organized together, and they also sent representatives and contributed to the events organized by individual societies. The MSBJ correspondence includes letters from a wide variety of Mexican (and also some Spanish) benefit societies that were active in northwest Indiana.\(^8^9\) From the rise of

\(^{87}\) García and Cal, “El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José,” 105.

\(^{88}\) García, Mexicans in the Midwest, 170-71.

\(^{89}\) From the list of organizations that were in existence in the twenties, I found evidence of the continuation into the forties of the following: Sociedad Josefa Ortiz Domínguez, Sociedad Feminina Mexicana, Sociedad Mexicana Cuauhtémoc, and Comisión Honorífica Mexicana. There are also records of eight new organizations from East Chicago and four from Gary, and we have to assume that there were others from which records have not been recovered: Asociación Femenil Pro-México (East Chicago, 1940); Centro Español de Beneficencia, Instrucción, Recreo y Protección (Gary, 1940); Club “Regis” Femenil (East Chicago, 1938); Club Social Educativo Recreativo (Gary); Comité Patriótico de 1940 (East Chicago, 1941); Comité Pro-México (East Chicago, 1941); Junta Patriótica Mexicana (East Chicago, 1942); Latin American Veterans Club (East Chicago); Sección Femenil “Cuauhtémoc” (East Chicago, 1941); Sociedad Mutualista “México” (Gary, 1940); Sociedad Mutualista Auxiliar Femenil “Benito Juárez” (East Chicago, 1924); Unión Española de Beneficencia, Instrucción y Recreo (Gary, 1941).
Mexican colonies in the Calumet region, various societies made repeated efforts to unite. Unity—or solidarity—was one of the most widely publicized aims of mutualista leaders, often repeated in constitutions and speeches. Mutualistas considered unity as a process of development that required constant work, as well as a condition for growth and a source of political power for social change. In 1925, nine Mexican societies from Chicago, Indiana Harbor, Joliet, and Waukegan joined their resources and launched La confederación de Sociedades Mexicanas de los Estados Unidos de América. The confederation included the MSBJ and its counterpart in Chicago. The federation was active for one-and-a-half years and met some member needs, but the effort failed due to internal dissension and personality conflicts. Other efforts to unify societies in the Chicago and Calumet region met with the same fate. In 1929, a Confederation of Societies of Lake County was formed in East Chicago, but it failed to incorporate several groups, the MSBJ among them. All attempts to unite had to overcome religious, political, and class differences among Mexicans, and also obstacles such as shifting membership, personal jealousies and ambitions, and disputes over the use of funds.

Mutual aid society leaders expressed concern over the number of groups, interpreting the proliferation as proof of community fragmentation. The MSBJ collection records initial talks in 1944 regarding an association with the Mexican Society Cuauhtémoc. Memorandums reveal, however, that each society wanted to proceed at its own rate. MSBJ’s initial approach was voted down by the other group’s members.

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90 Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 89. The road to unification had also proved hard in other parts of the country. In 1911, the Primer Congreso Mexicanista sought to bring together all the established and emerging societies under one unified banner, but their hopes fell short. According to Hernández, “unity of organization failed. The idea that an autonomous, self-governing fraternal order might be an associate member of an amalgamation was difficult to understand and interpret. . . . The idea of sovereignty and local control lay at the bottom of their conception of organization, frequently colliding with the mutualista idea of unity and drive for the integration of contending societies.”

91 Arredondo, Mexican Chicago, 214.

92 Hernández, Mutual Aid for Survival, 76.

93 Taylor, “Mexican Labor in the Calumet Region,” 57.
On Sunday the 6th of the current month, this Society celebrated an extraordinary meeting in its Assembly Hall. . . . At that meeting the matter of unification, requested nobly and sincerely by our sister Society “Benito Juarez”, was discussed with great serenity and prudence. Please let me express to you that, for reasons beyond our control, this time we have not been able to fulfill such high and noble intentions. However, this in no way represents the last word, so we must continue working without dismay until we reach the patriotic and noble goals we are pursuing. 

The MSBJ expressed its frustration that “the only definitive way to assure a real future of progress” for the larger Mexican community had been voted down.

What we do not understand and sincerely regret is that . . . you have not seized the opportunity to consider and better understand the specific and positive significance of the greatness of unification, in the reality of the Mexican conglomerate. The issue is of such magnitude that it would be unjust and in contrast to our interests to continue insisting on ideas that have hindered us greatly and have distanced us from the true patriotism that teaches us to recognize one banner, the tri-color flag, which signifies that we are children of the same fatherland and therefore we should as such live united, for its honor and ours wherever we may live . . . . The terms of the Mutual Aid Society “Benito Juárez” are not based in the dreams of the imagination, but are based in the realm of the feasible, in the reality of the need to live united.

Five years later, both organizations agreed to meet monthly in order to coordinate their future activities. In 1950, cooperation

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94 Felix Canamar and C.V. Fernandez to Emilio Reyes Perez, February 15, 1944, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
95 Emilio Reyes Perez and H.R. Silva to Mexican Society Cuauhtémoc, March 5, 1944, folder 5, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
96 Salvador Tristain to MSBJ, November 7, 1949, folder 8, box 1, CRA 136, UBM Records.
culminated in an agreement on a number of important issues, including the celebration of anniversaries, dances, and festivals; the naming of joint committees and board officers; and the scheduling of monthly meetings. The two groups also resolved to collaborate only with “those organizations that, because of their age or services rendered to the colony, are recognized, since it is almost impossible to establish any control over the rest of organizations for a minimally reasonable period.”

On July 8, 1956, in Indiana Harbor, the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez and the Sociedad Mutualista Cuauhtémoc formally united to create the Unión Benéfica Mexicana. On November 25, a third organization—the Sociedad Protectora Benéfica de Trabajadores Latinoamericanos—joined the union. The 1958 by-laws of the new organization explained that the three societies had come together

To unite capital and efforts toward the end that all their activities bring forth better and true advantages and benefits to all its members, giving prestige with this noble example to the name of the Mexican Colony of East Chicago, Ind., and honoring the name of MEXICO as it well deserves.

The UBM gained power not only in the Calumet region, but in the wider Chicago area and in Indiana. Local businesses and organizations, large and small, contributed to the group, which was seen as a necessary ally for business leaders and politicians who wanted to connect with the area’s large Latino community. The focus on personal benefits for members gave way to aiding the Mexican community in the U.S. and Mexico when the need arose. After the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, for example, the UBM donated two truckloads of supplies as well as $65,000. The society still meets monthly and continues to promote
Mexican culture. The parade and festivities for Mexican Independence Day draw eight to twelve thousand people every year.

Mexicans first migrated to the Calumet region of northwest Indiana to meet the labor needs of the meatpacking industry and railroad companies; a much larger wave of immigrants arrived with the development of the steel industry along Lake Michigan. From their earliest years in the region, Mexicans turned to mutual aid societies as a resource for self-help. In doing this, they joined the ranks of other immigrants who were also forming ethnically and nationally based fraternal societies, and they followed in the footsteps of their compatriots in Mexico, where several mutual aid societies were already in existence by the late 1800s. From

Women’s softball game, 1945. In the 1940s and 1950s, mutual aid societies focused less on insurance and more on cultural, educational, and recreational events.

Courtesy, Calumet Regional Archives

Mexican Independence Parade still receives a higher education scholarship (matched by the university in question).
the 1920s through the 1940s, a variety of Mexican fraternal organizations arose in northwest Indiana, one of the largest and most influential of which was the Mutual Aid Society Benito Juárez.

The MSBJ collection in the Calumet Regional Archives offers rare access to a wide variety of records pertaining to the life of the organization and gives researchers a view of the goals, challenges, and day-to-day operations of a Mexican fraternal society during the first half of the twentieth century. The collection’s documents reveal that these groups addressed a number of needs for their members and for the Mexican community at large. In exchange for their dues, members were guaranteed basic life insurance, health insurance in case of accident or illness, as well as legal representation and protection in the face of widespread discrimination. The impact of fraternal societies, however, extended into the larger Mexican community. Mutual aid societies acted as the primary organizers for events that kept Mexican culture and traditions alive in the United States. With their central role in orchestrating the celebration of Mexican patriotic festivities, dances, and cultural and artistic gatherings, the MSBJ and the other mutualidades in northwest Indiana defined the social and communal life of the colonia. Each society had its own target membership and audience: some were religiously oriented, others were more closely associated with middle-class values, and still others were strongly identified with blue-collar workers and their way of life. These differences seem to point more to the dynamism of the Mexican immigrant society than to any real break within the Mexican community. Mexicans from every society gathered together for celebrations, and the correspondence among societies documents a history of collaboration and support. At a time when Mexicans’ participation in American social, economic, and political life was hindered by racism and discrimination, the halls of mutual aid societies provided an arena to learn and apply democratic practices. As these organizations held elections, wrote by-laws, named commissions, and held meetings, they became a critical component of the Mexican immigrants’ education for civic engagement.

The Unión Benéfica Mexicana, born of the merger of the MSBJ with two other local societies, has survived without interruption from its foundation in 1956 to the present. Very few organizations of this kind, regardless of their members’ ethnicity, have shown such a staying power in the communities where they were born. Indeed, we can look at the century-old Mexican community of northwest Indiana as a compelling example of how resilience and sense of community can advance the civic goals of an immigrant minority.