Introduction

The Mexican Americans of Middlewest and Farm County have a rich and multifaceted culture. A few unpublished reports have examined certain aspects of their role in the early settlement of the state, but there is no written history of Mexican Americans in Idaho.

In the nineteenth century, a few Mexican Americans worked in Idaho as miners, cowboys, and as railroad workers. However, Laurie Mercier and Carole Simon-Smolinski (1990) estimate that at the beginning of the twentieth century fewer than 100 Mexican Americans lived in Idaho. They consider the arrival of Mexican Americans to be associated with the development of agriculture in Idaho starting in the early 1900s. Sugar-beet farmers at that time actively recruited Mexican American workers from South Texas and Mexico. According to Mercier and Simon-Smolenski, in the 1920s approximately 1,000 Mexican
Americans lived in Idaho. Much of the history (as yet to be told) of Mexican Americans in Idaho is connected to their role as migrant agricultural workers.

Most of the Mexican Americans interviewed for this study had at one time been migrant field workers. Pat Ourada (1979) and Erasmo Gamboa (1990), historians who have partially documented the evolution of migrant Mexican Americans in Idaho, agree that the Bracero program from 1942 to 1964, an established agreement between the governments of Mexico and the United States, assisted Idaho farmers to obtain Mexican workers during and after World War II. The Bracero program initiated a movement that continues to this day. People of Mexican American heritage remain the primary group of Idaho farm workers.

Today, most Mexican American field workers in southwestern Idaho come from south Texas and Mexico. Ourada and Gamboa agree that during the Bracero program the Mexican American migrant workers suffered low wages, miserable housing conditions, and racial discrimination. The Mexican American migrant workers participated in periodic protests and strikes to attempt to remedy these inequities. Gamboa, whose work is more comprehensive, has examined the Bracero program in Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.

Gamboa documents the fact that Mexican migrant workers in Idaho received harsher treatment than did those in Oregon and Washington. The Mexican consul in Portland went so far as to cancel the Bracero program for two years in Idaho because of the mistreatment of the Mexican farm workers. The abuse of Mexican Americans in Middlewest could be seen to continue this practice today. Among the Mexican Americans interviewed were some older men who migrated from Texas in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They vividly recall seeing signs in the windows of business establishments warning, "No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed," and they claim that public facilities also displayed these signs.
Population Data and Field Research Techniques

In 1955 the U.S. Public Health Service reported that 21,000 Mexican American migrants came annually to Idaho. However, even in 1960, only 3,341 Mexican Americans resided permanently in Idaho. Today, most Idaho Mexican Americans still work as farm workers and laborers, their average income being two-thirds that of Anglos in Idaho. Many Mexican Americans still work for a minimum wage. It was estimated in 1990 that 33 percent of Mexican Americans live in poverty in Idaho. In my field research, I interviewed some Mexican American businessmen and professionals; but, as the above statistics indicate, most Mexican Americans are still at or near the bottom of the economic ladder.

Because of the high number of Mexican Americans in the poverty category, where they are less likely to be counted, demographers have a difficult time estimating the number of Mexican Americans in Idaho. The statistics also are complicated by the significant number of migrants who come into the state regularly. Another problem in obtaining an accurate count of Mexican Americans occurs because of the many undocumented Mexican migrant farm workers in Idaho. It has been estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 undocumented Mexican workers come to Idaho each year. Under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 approximately 11,000 undocumented Mexicans have applied for amnesty in Idaho.

When interviewing Mexican Americans, I asked them to share their daily life experiences and how they believe Mexican American life differs from that of the Anglos in Middlewest. I asked Mexican Americans particularly about their important cultural practices. As with any group, some respondents were more verbal, more articulate, and more thorough in their responses to interview questions. Many subjects needed some assistance, by way of examples, to enable them to analyze the taken-for-granted aspects of their lives.

Interviews with 210 Mexican Americans enabled me to construct a facsimile reproduction of Mexican American culture in Middlewest and Farm County. I am confident that although the
following analysis is incomplete, it does represent the main features of Mexican American culture in Idaho. The accuracy of the cultural analysis derives from my discussions with key Mexican American informants willing to share in depth with me their knowledge of Mexican American cultural practices. It should be noted that this cultural analysis must be seen as an ideal type, meaning that no subject entirely participates in all the features of his/her culture. The existence of cultural traits does not preclude the existence of a multitude of unique personalities within this cultural framework. It is important to keep in mind that later in this chapter there will be a discussion of a typology of Mexican Americans.

Family Life

The most significant cultural trait among Mexican Americans of Middlewest is their family life. Most Mexican Americans I interviewed recognized the importance of this aspect of their lives. Mexican Americans spend much of their non-working time with their families. Many adult Mexican Americans call their parents every day and have dinner with them nearly every weekend. Mexican Americans report that their most frequent social activity is joining with relatives for activities. In the summer this generally means a family barbecue. The extended family celebrates both American and Mexican holidays together.

The intimacy of kin means that Mexican Americans are less individualistic than Anglos. Family loyalty and support goes unquestioned. Mexican Americans agree that they have the responsibility to support their extended family both financially and emotionally. Mexican Americans contend that Anglos do not appreciate the preeminence of family relations for Mexican Americans or the family solidarity that remains strong across generations. Davis (1990) believes that the almost sacred importance of the family derives from the influence of the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

In Mexican American families the children do not leave home when they become adults, as they commonly do in Anglo society. Some young married adults live with their parents,
though this is in part due to economic factors. Mexican Americans perceive it as natural for single adults to live at home. Mexican American parents do not feel comfortable with the Anglo norm that has the single young adult being on his or her own. Four generations live together in some Mexican American households.

The primacy of family relations means that Mexican American children generally respect their parents. They do not question their parents’ authority or talk back to them. Mexican American youths do not address their parents unless granted permission. One example of the value placed on respect for parents was provided by a young married Mexican American woman who said that, though her father passed away five years ago, she still turns off her car radio when she drives by his grave.

Mexican American culture holds a high regard for the elderly. Mexican Americans uniformly assert that they would never send their parents to nursing homes. The Mexican American migrant family does not leave the grandparents in Texas. In the labor camps, grandmothers take care of their grandchildren while the parents work in the fields. Most Mexican Americans believe that family loyalty can always be counted on despite one’s transgressions.

An adjunct to Mexican American family life is the comadre_COMPADRE relationship. The comadre (female) or compadre (male) is a special friend, or it can also signify a god-parent. This relationship becomes an extension of the family support system. Such persons can be counted on for emotional and financial support. They have designated roles in baptismal and confirmation ceremonies, for which they often provide financial support. A family generally only has a few such friends, but in Middlewest this relationship has been extended because of the increased need for financial support.

Padrinos, a Spanish term that also refers to co-parents, are expected to contribute financially to the expenses of marriages and *Quinceañeras* (the celebration of a girl’s fifteenth birthday). Most Mexican American families see padrinos as surrogate relatives.
Mexican American culture creates a number of intimate bonds that do not exist to the same extent in Anglo society. Mexican Americans view themselves as less individualistic than Anglos (Schaefer 1991). Mexican American life, as a consequence of the close social bonds, requires “sharing” among those close to each other. These types of relationships often allow Mexican Americans to express their emotions to a greater extent than Anglos. The intimacy developed in the extended family and compadres creates an intimate social atmosphere that affects all social interaction. Anglos place the highest value on individual success, whereas Mexican Americans will not sacrifice their social obligations for individual rewards. For example, Mexican American youth frequently quit school to work because their large families need the financial assistance.

Social Traits

The Mexican American community appears to emit more warmth than the “cooler” Anglo culture. Father Acuna told me that his Anglo parishioners requested him to stop hugging them after mass. In contrast, Mexican Americans regularly express an intimacy and warmth when they greet and mingle. For Mexican Americans it is not inappropriate to touch one another in a non-sexual manner; they are genuinely happy to see their friends and they express it.

Mexican American social relations rely more on personal relationships than on formal social structures. For example, Don Juarez asked me to be his advisor at the university because Sue Peña, a Mexican American leader, had recommended me. Many Anglo students at the university want the fastest possible interaction with their advisors and the university bureaucracy. All some want is a quick signature so that they may quickly depart. Don wanted me to know both him and his family. He also wanted to know me beyond my role as an academic advisor. He has been in to see me three times for a total of an hour and a half, enabling me to know Don as a real person and not just an advisee whose name I cannot remember.
In the Mexican American community people share limited re-
resources. Mexican Americans know that they can rely on family,
relatives, and sometimes padrinos if they need emergency finan-
cial assistance. Part of the sharing within the Mexican American
community exists as an adaptation to the conditions of poverty.
Sharing occurs regularly among Mexican Americans, in contrast
to that among Anglos. The funerals of poor Mexican Americans
provide good examples of the sharing trait. During my field re-
search, on three occasions Mexican American leaders organized
the collection of donations to finance funeral expenses. In one
case, a Mexican American migrant family was passing through
Middlewest when their sick child died. Although the family had
no relatives or friends in town, the Idaho Migrant Council orga-
nized a fund-raising drive and collected enough money to pay
the funeral expenses.

Father Acuna was born and raised in Mexico. He has given
careful thought to how the Mexican culture differs from that of
the United States. In his role as priest, he ministers to these two
groups separately. Father Acuna thinks Mexicans “enjoy” life
more than Americans. He said that Anglos go around looking
“so serious” all the time. In Mexican culture, time is not such a
controlling factor in a person’s life as it is in the U.S. For Mexi-
cans, personal relationships are more important than either time
or money; it is not as important to be economically successful
in Mexican culture.

Father Acuna went on to say that Anglos are “cold” when
compared to Mexicans. However, Mexican Americans’ retention
of cultural traits appears to depend on their level of adaptation
to American culture. Father Acuna said that to recognize the
cultural difference one need only compare an Anglo church so-
cial with a Chicano church social. He explained that the Chicano
event will have music, dancing, and singing that creates a “warm
and happy” state of mind, while he sees the Anglo church social
as a “dull and boring” affair because everyone remains serious.

Father Acuna cited Octavio Paz (1985) to claim that the Mexi-
can American character reveals both a sense of inferiority and a
sense of melancholy. This attitude leads to a certain sense of fa-
talism, which is hidden by a sense of privacy and a social mask
worn to hide the emotions. This originated with the Mexicans having been conquered by the Spanish; it was then extenuated by the United States’ conquest of half of Mexico. This sense of inferiority has been furthered by the subordination of the Mexican American population within the United States. A Mexican American social worker in Midwest said that shame is a critical factor in his work with Mexican American clients; his continuous concern is to avoid shaming his clients.

Cultural Clashes

The closeness of family and kin results in some problems for Mexican Americans as they interact with Anglo society. Mexican American culture recognizes the extended family as one unit, whereas Anglo culture only recognizes the nuclear family. The Farmers Home Administration (FHA) limits the number of individuals who can live in one dwelling, and the labor camps for Mexican American migrant workers have regulations concerning housing occupancy. The Anglo managers of these labor camps are insensitive to Mexican American culture, and they evict extended Mexican American families because the rules allow only a nuclear family to reside in the apartments. Anglo managers often interpret the Mexican American living arrangements as being an attempt to “cheat on their rent.” The managers are also indifferent to the poverty of Mexican American migrants that forces families to violate the regulation limiting the number of residents allowed to reside in an apartment.

A second problem arising from cultural differences develops from Anglo teachers believing Mexican American students to be disinterested in school because those students follow their culture’s practice of subservient interaction with adults. Mexican American children and adolescents normally avert their eyes from adults and do not participate in class discussions. Many Anglo teachers infer from this that Mexican American youth do not respect them and that they lack intelligence because of their silence.

David Barrera, a former student at Boise State University whom I interviewed, has an excellent understanding of the
problems and issues facing the Mexican American community. When he was a student in my class, David did not participate in class discussions even when they involved Idaho's Mexican Americans. I later commented on his lack of participation and how enriching his observations would have been for the class. His response was that it was just too uncomfortable for him to speak in class even though a considerable portion of the grade in this class depended on class participation.

A third problem involves Mexican American youth interacting in both the Mexican American and Anglo cultures. Mexican American adolescents typically want to participate and succeed in Anglo society; but first-generation, Spanish-speaking Mexican American parents find themselves at a disadvantage when they try to assist their children. The parents feel inadequate because they generally cannot afford the clothes and spending money needed, and these situations then can lead to intrafamilial conflicts for some Mexican American parents and their children. As a result, some youth look to their peers for behavioral cues, and the result of that can be antisocial behavior.

Some young Mexican American women resent the strict family control of their behavior. The Mexican tradition of protecting young women continues in many Mexican American families in Middlewest. Young women do not have the same freedoms as young men: many adolescent girls cannot date; sometimes an older brother will monitor the behavior and the friends of his sister. One adolescent girl said that her older brother monitors her telephone calls.

One aspect of family solidarity requires Mexican American youth to relinquish their paychecks to their parents. Mexican Americans do not consider this practice to be exploitative. Many Mexican American youths work because of their families' poverty; some Anglos consider this practice to be unfair.

Another feature of Mexican American life in Middlewest involves migrant workers "settling out," that is, deciding to live permanently in Middlewest. The presence of new residents from southern Texas and Mexico helps preserve Mexican American culture in Middlewest. However, new immigrants from Mexico, some legal and some undocumented, generally do not speak
English and many of them only have an elementary education. Many Anglos do not recognize this continuous migration. They believe these new immigrants have lived in the United States for many years, which then leads them to believe that Mexican Americans do not want to learn English and that they do not want to be educated. This erroneous perception leads many Anglos to think that Mexican Americans lack the intelligence to adapt to the dominant society.

While attending a Mexican American Issues Conference in Boise in the fall of 1992, I met a young Mexican American male attending Idaho State University. He made some insightful comments about the cultural shock he experienced returning to the university setting after spending three years in Mexico. He had grown up in Idaho but his family returned to Mexico because of a death in the family. He said he fell in love with Mexico; the effect of the country on his identity was profound and he became Mexican. The traditions and culture had some effect but the daily life and the closeness to nature most impressed him. Upon his return to the university, he found that he was unable to deal with the stress and the coldness of Anglo culture. He said it wasn't until he had been to Mexico that he could see how impersonal American social interaction was. He claimed that nobody knew him or cared about him at the university. He dropped out of college but returned to school after working in the fields for two years.

**Machismo**

Sociologists have a continuous debate over the authenticity of machismo as a trait of Mexican American males. Are Mexican American males more aggressive and tyrannical in their relationships with their families and with other Mexican American males as Paz (1985) suggests? Mirande (1985) believes that Anglo social scientists have helped to create a negative image of Mexican Americans and that they have inaccurately depicted the typical Chicano male as being violent and abusive.

However, two female social scientists, Blea (1980) and Horowitz (1986), report from their community studies that Mexican
American culture does indeed involve male dominance. The Chicano perspective of masculinity is one that views men and women as having distinct gender roles, with the male having a higher status in male-female relationships. The studies found that the Chicano father was perceived as being the head of the family and the person making the major decisions in the home. Blea and Horowitz agree with Mirande that male dominance does not include a license for violence and family abuse. This account would probably also be accurate for the majority of Anglo families.

Mexican American males and females I interviewed agreed that machismo does not condone violent behavior or family abuse. The analysis of machismo can be illuminated by viewing the father's behavior on a continuum. Those Mexican American males least assimilated into American culture exercise more control in their family decisions. For example, Sara Zabala grew up in Midwest. She had worked for five years as a secretary prior to meeting her husband, who had only been in the U.S. for two years. After the couple married, Sara's husband did not think it appropriate for her to keep her credit cards or to go out unescorted in the evening.

The machismo factor is reduced when partners have long resided in the United States or when the wife works outside the home. The majority of Mexican American families interviewed did not think the term machismo was an accurate description of Mexican American males' behavior. They did say that older males are more likely to make decisions within the family. I interviewed several Mexican American males who had the responsibility for child care when their wives worked. Contrary to the machismo stereotype, most Mexican American males I interviewed were warm, gentle, and hospitable. My interviews with Mexican American males leads me to agree with Mirande's (1985) idea that the concept of machismo represents another negative stereotype of Mexican Americans that serves to justify the criminalization of Mexican American males who resist their oppressive conditions.

The Anglo community views adolescent Mexican American males who join gangs as examples of the machismo feature of
Mexican American culture. They condemn the physical violence practiced by these youths while denying the psychological violence that the schools have perpetrated against them. This point will be expanded upon in Chapter Nine.

Many Anglos believe that Mexican American culture and machismo force Mexican American males into fights. These Anglos acquire this perception from the police reports and the mass media; their knowledge of Mexican American culture often encompasses only what they see on television and read in the newspaper.

Language

Mexican Americans consider their language a crucial element of their culture; Spanish is a key source of identification and pride. Mexican Americans feel a sense of satisfaction when hearing their language spoken. Many Mexican American leaders who are fluent in English commented on their sense of relaxation and enjoyment when engaging in a Spanish conversation. One's language assists in creating and sustaining one's identity.

Language provides a way of seeing and understanding the world, and it cannot be separated from a people's culture. One cannot fully appreciate a culture unless its language is known. Mexican Americans told me that their ideas and feelings are not always translatable. One tangible verification of the importance of language is found in the fact that many Mexican Americans "code switch." In code switching a person uses both English and Spanish interchangeably because the languages do not always express the same things; different languages create different social realities.

Code switching is an interesting phenomenon that has been studied by Rosaura Sanchez (1983). As she sees it, the Mexican Americans who are most likely to use code switching are those who are concerned about their social mobility. She views code switching as a reaction to the subordinant/dominant relationship that exists between Mexican Americans and Anglos. Mexican Americans attempting to enhance their social standing use code switching. Code switching is viewed by Sanchez as a part of
assimilation among its many additional functions that are not relevant to this analysis.

Language can function as an indicator of ethnicity. Some non-Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans lament their linguistic inability: whenever they attend Mexican American social events most of the conversation is in Spanish. It is interesting that Mexican American names such as Humberto, Julio, Francisco, Hermelinda, Serafina, Amalia are properly pronounced with a soft and romantic connotation. Some Anglos anglicize or harden the names of Mexican Americans, so that José becomes Joe.

Mexican Americans born and raised in Middlewest are unlikely to be fluent in Spanish. Many parents who want their children to succeed place an emphasis on their children learning English. However, the grandparents dislike the fact that their grandchildren cannot speak Spanish. Many Mexican American families in Middlewest have numerous children. In these homes it was not uncommon to find that the older children could speak Spanish while the younger ones could not. The children who begin grade school in Middlewest spend most of their time speaking English; it is difficult for these children to become fluent in Spanish.

Some Mexican American parents teach their children Spanish at home. There is a stigma attached to Mexican Americans who cannot speak Spanish. The adult Mexican Americans generally regret their inability to speak Spanish, but Mexican American adolescents often do not, because they see themselves as participating in the larger social domain. Nearly all Mexican Americans recognize the need to speak English if they are to be economically successful.

Liz Jarvez claimed that her daughters never spoke a word of English until they went to school. Her parents treated her and her siblings the same, always speaking Spanish in the home. Liz concluded, "My children had to learn Spanish; I didn't want them to forget who they are."
English Language Bill

An understanding of the racism in Middlewest requires an examination of the English language controversy. Anglos in Middlewest overwhelmingly support a bill introduced in the state legislature each year by their local legislator designating English as the official language of Idaho. They presented some of their reasons:

"If you are going to live in America you have to speak English."

"We don't want a situation like in Quebec."

"If I went to Mexico to live, I would learn Spanish."

"If these people are going to get ahead they have to learn how to speak English."

"Look at the other immigrants to America; they gave up their languages."

Anglos in Middlewest have an endless repertoire of complaints about Mexican Americans speaking Spanish. Anglos believe it to be impolite when Mexican Americans speak Spanish in the presence of Anglos. They also sometimes think Mexican Americans are talking about them. Many Anglos erroneously believe that all Mexican Americans have lived in Middlewest for a long time and, therefore, they all should be able to speak English.

Certain Anglos declare that Mexican Americans know how to speak English but refuse to do so. Many Anglos fail to recognize that many Mexican Americans understand English but feel embarrassed by their pronunciation. Anglos do not appreciate the fact that adults, especially those with limited formal education, have a difficult and intimidating experience when they attempt to learn a foreign language.

Some Anglos justify their demand for English by stating that the inability to speak English will interfere with the speedy transaction of business. They claim that they think job directives and safety become problematic if workers do not speak English.

Race relations are complicated social realities. On the one hand, one could interpret Anglo concerns about Mexican Americans speaking English as a matter of good will—they want
Mexican Americans to participate in society. However, Anglo decision makers regularly reject programs that would assist Mexican Americans to learn English. The rationalizations employed by Anglos contain a twisted logic that suggests empathy but often reveals a belief that Mexican American culture is inferior to the dominant culture.

Anglos do not believe the requirement to speak English is ethnocentric. However, most Mexican American subjects oppose this legislation. When interviewing Anglos in the latter part of my field research, I informed them of Mexican Americans' feelings about the English language bill. The Anglos did not then change their opinion; they continued to insist that English be the official language.

The English-only view is indirectly an Anglo demand for conformity. Anglos in Middlewest from the mayor and the ministers to the working class want Mexican Americans to assimilate. Mexican American culture is linked to social problems. The following quote comes from a Anglo civic leader and is representative of the dominant attitude about language and assimilation: “I support the English language view. I oppose the bilingual thing. If they [Mexican Americans] make a decision to live in America then they have to learn English. This is how America was formed. I don't want to sound like a redneck but immigrants have to meld.”

School administrators in Middlewest support the English language bill and they have not provided leadership in creating bilingual programs for Mexican American students. The lack of adequate bilingual education for Mexican Americans is one of the major causes of the high Mexican American student dropout rate. The net result of the English-only view is that Mexican American youths do not graduate and will be relegated to the lower echelon job market. The exploitive model contends that Mexican Americans face oppressive conditions. Most Anglos do not understand this and scoff at the idea of oppression, but the failure to educate Mexican American youth means that most of them will be forced to live in poverty.

Language is a key feature of any culture. Many Anglos in Middlewest will not listen to the Mexican American point of
view and, without recognizing it, are indirectly demanding that Mexican Americans change their identities and their culture. The intensity with which Anglos support the language bill suggests their high level of discomfort with the Mexican American people in Middlewest.

A minority whose culture is denied rarely adapts well to another culture. The demand for general assimilation into Anglo culture results in alienated people who do not know the appropriate behavior in either culture. The narrow interpretation of American history as basically Anglo-European misses the fact that America is fundamentally a multicultural society. This diversity provides rich cultural resources for enhancing our lives and enabling us to better understand the human condition and human diversity.

A sociological evaluation of the English language issue reveals a coded message: the English language bill represents a symbolic form of racism. Such a bill, if passed, would be unenforceable, impractical, and demeaning. Estella Medina said it best: “Language is what I am as a person. This English language bill is stepping on a person—an injury. They are telling us Mexican Americans that there is something wrong with us, that we are second-class citizens. It also assumes that we have no loyalty to America. The English language bill is a real slap in the face.”

Mexican American leaders point out that many advantages accrue to those who are bilingual. The opportunities for employment are enhanced for those who speak more than one language. One sign of being an educated person is to be able to speak a foreign language.

### Food

Mexican Americans have a distinctive cuisine, and the majority of Middlewest’s Mexican American people said they eat Mexican food 75 percent of the time. However, the longer a Mexican American family lives in Idaho, the less likely they are to eat Mexican food. The Mexican food prepared in the homes of Mexican Americans is not the Mexican food served in Mexican
restaurants. The most common daily dinner prepared by low-income Mexican Americans consists of beans, rice, and tortillas. Another common dinner has beef or chicken prepared in a hot sauce. Many Mexican American subjects joked about their hot and spicy food.

At fiestas, religious holidays, and important social events the Mexican American community serves special Mexican foods that are expensive and take longer to prepare. Four of the most popular foods are tamales, *buñuelos* (a sugar-coated, deep-fried bread), *menudo* (a tripe soup), and *pan dulce* (sweet breads). Mexican Americans also eat *barbacoa de cabeza* on special occasions; this involves barbecuing a cow’s head for twenty-four hours. It is considered a special treat that is eaten on special occasions; the cost is prohibitive for many low-income families. Ofilia Chávez, who operates the grocery store at the Middlewest Labor Camp, prepares beef heads, so too does a local Mexican American businessman.

The Rodriguez bakery truck from a nearby town in Oregon has a regular weekly route in the Mexican American districts of Middlewest, including deliveries to some of the businesses in town. The truck sells Mexican-style sweet breads and cookies.

**Music and Dance**

Music and dance have an important place in Mexican American culture. Many Middlewest Mexican Americans listen to Mexican American radio stations. A nearby town has the only regional full-time Spanish-language station; two other radio stations have an hour or two of Spanish broadcasts a day. A Mexican American Catholic priest has a weekly program, but the most popular programs play both traditional and contemporary Mexican American music. The local Mexican Americans enjoy several music styles, including the Ranchera (a type of polka), the Cumbia (a more Latin type of music from South America), the Hupango (a fast music from Mexico), and the Norteña (also from northern Mexico). The Norteña accentuates the guitar and the accordion.
Mariachi, a traditional form of Mexican music, thrives in the Mexican American community. Middlewest has two Mexican mariachi bands. These groups sometimes play at the Mexican American Catholic church; they also play for weddings, Quinceañeras, and fiestas. Some of the instruments used by the mariachi band come from Mexico.

A Mexican American teacher from a nearby small town has a contemporary Mexican band. This group plays for family celebrations and fiestas, but most of the time they play at a Mexican dance hall in Middlewest. The owner of the dance hall regularly hires Mexican bands from Texas, California, and Mexico. He charges admission of from ten to fifteen dollars per person. Most Mexican Americans earn a low income, but as many as 400 patrons attend these dances. The popularity of this dance hall, despite the high admission price, indicates the importance of music, song, and dance to the Mexican American community. One Mexican American exclaimed to me: "Oh, you won't be able to appreciate what music and dance means to us, it's not the same as Anglos going to a dance for a good time. Well, it is that, but it's more; the music and dance reminds us of the joys of being Mexican."

Few Anglos attend the Mexican dances, but many have a distinct image of this dance hall—the police and newspaper report on the fights that occur there. Rowdy and raucous behavior by some young men is not atypical of any group of working-class males. The high number of altercations at the Middlewest dances occur, in part, because of the number of young male migrant workers who have no community ties. The intense community focus on this dance hall creates a deviant image of the entire Mexican American community. Most Anglos of Middlewest have no knowledge of the solidarity and enjoyment that this dance hall provides for the local Mexican American community.

Mexican Americans have a distinctive style of dancing which calls for partners to dance side by side. The dance symbolically indicates the important role of the family in Mexican American life, because parents dance with their children and relatives. Mexican American teenagers are not embarrassed to be seen
dancing with their adult relatives. This type of dancing also re­veals the unity within the Mexican American community. The community dances together, side by side, not as couples. The family, kin, and friends dance together in a common closed circle. Mexican American community solidarity continues because these dances occur at weddings, Quinceañeras, and fiestas.

Within the Mexican American community of Middlewest there are several groups of men who sporadically come together to play music. Sometimes they become more serious about their music and play for local Mexican American bars and nightclubs. However, they primarily play for the enjoyment it brings. Most Mexican American musicians say that they learned to play from family or friends; many of them do not read music. They claim that music has always been part of their lives, because when the extended family has a social, someone will always sing and play guitar.

**Fiesta**

The two celebrations that involve the largest fiestas are Cinco de Mayo and Dieciseis de Septiembre. Cinco de Mayo commemorates the May 5, 1863, victory of the Mexican army over the French forces at Puebla. The September 16 celebration commemorates Mexican Independence Day. Fiestas and celebrations also are held in conjunction with weddings, baptisms, Quinceañeras, and Catholic church holidays.

All fiestas include food, music, dancing, and singing. The fiesta commonly features numerous booths that sell traditional Mexican piñatas, paper flowers, and crafts, although the main feature of a fiesta is the entertainment. Mexican American men and women dress in traditional Mexican clothes. Women's dresses generally are more colorful than those worn by Anglo women and combine colors that make for a vivid presence. Mexican American males wear black and dark-colored clothes that have a distinctive style and cut. Mexican American adolescents (these are not members of gangs) frequently wear all black clothing. The boys' favorite attire is L.A. Raiders jackets and hats. Mexican American women also wear black but
they often wear dresses with black as the background color to increase the contrast with the vivid colors in their dresses.

Some fiestas have charros, Mexican American cowboys, in traditional Mexican dress with large sombreros, who ride horses and perform special tricks while riding. Some charros have extraordinary skill in the use of the lariat. The fiestas usually have several groups of dancers of different ages who perform traditional Mexican dances. The local dance instructor, José Muñoz, grew up in Mexico and graduated from the University of Mexico, majoring in dance and drama. For years he has volunteered his time to instruct younger dancers. The Mexican American community appreciates his work because the dancers represent an important aspect of Mexican American culture.

A successful fiesta requires many volunteers to organize all of the performers and to prepare the food and crafts for the booths. Mexican Americans commit their time and energy to fiestas because these events enhance community unity and help maintain the culture. Although the booths make money, no one in the Mexican American community works on a fiesta for profit. Jesse Torres and his wife have a booth at all of the fiestas where they sell buñuelos and piñatas. This retired couple donate their proceeds to their church. Most Middlewest Mexican Americans consider Jesse to be the most important local Mexican American leader, yet he is not above working at a booth for his community.

Fiestas in the broadest sense contain more facets of Mexican American culture than do any other events. A fiesta is the culmination of the efforts of many people. Leaders organize these events and serve as masters of ceremonies. Each person practices his/her craft to prepare for a successful fiesta. Women make costumes and prepare the food. Men haul material and set up the booths and equipment.

The fiesta celebrates some of the key elements of Mexican American culture: singing, dancing, and music. Many fiestas are held after church celebrations; Father Acuna sang several songs with a mariachi band at one fiesta. Estella Medina, who works at the county courthouse, exclaimed to me: "This fiesta is wonderful. It renews my faith in our people. Look at all
these good people; and the entertainment is fantastic. I feel bad because all you [Anglos] see is crime by our people.”

Religion

Most Mexican Americans in Middlewest practice Roman Catholicism. St. Mary's, the Middlewest Catholic church, has a separate Spanish-language mass on Sundays and observes Catholic church holidays as practiced in Mexico. The most important Mexican holy day is December 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A special mass said on this day commemorates the appearance of the Virgin Mary to an Indian, Juan Diego, in 1531. She asked that a church be built on the spot where the temple of an Aztec goddess once stood and she performed a miracle: although it was winter, she produced blooming rose bushes to induce the bishop to build the church. This religious holiday attempts to integrate Catholicism with native religions because the Virgin is portrayed wearing traditional Indian garments.

On the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Middlewest Mexican Americans fill the church for a mass which includes both music and song. Mexican American girls, dressed in traditional Mexican garments, perform a ritual dance. Father Correro presented roses to the women at the conclusion of the service. No Anglos attended this mass, other than myself.

A fiesta followed in the church auditorium. The entertainment included several groups of singers and dancers. A group of Mexican American adolescents even performed a rap dance, revealing the integration of Mexican culture with the popular culture of the United States. Mrs. Estella Medina acted as the mistress of ceremonies; her leadership position in the community in part derives from her involvement in church activities. The Mexican American church auxiliary sold buñuelos, tamales, and soft drinks.

For most Mexican Americans, religion is an integral part of everyday life. Sal Trevino, who ran for the state legislature, said to me that to be a Mexican American leader you must take an active role in the church. Jesús Martínez provided an example of
religion permeating a person's dialogue. In response to those promoting the English language bill, he said, "Those people better talk to God; God made the languages and I think he knew what he was doing."

**Weddings**

Mexican American weddings feature many of the cultural practices discussed above. A Mexican American wedding ceremony in the local Catholic church lasted two hours. A mariachi band played both religious and secular music. Several religious songs accompanied the wedding. The bride had six bridesmaids whose dresses of vivid gold and black conveyed a beauty and vitality distinctively Mexican American. Two small girls served as flower girls and they had dresses with the same colors. Several grade-school girls, relatives of the wedding party, also wore gold and black dresses.

In addition to the marriage vows, the ceremony involved placing a lasso over the couple to symbolize their bonding and unity. The couple received a rosary, a Bible, and a set of coins to symbolize a life of prosperity. The coins also signify the couple's ability to survive the good and bad times. The wedding ceremony is another example of the interweaving of Catholicism and Mexican American culture.

A traditional Mexican American wedding is an expensive affair. As part of the wedding ceremony, padrinos and relatives pledged their emotional and financial support for the couple. Padrinos received recognition for the gift they provided for the wedding. Several compadres addressed those attending concerning their support for the newly wedded couple and their future children. Following the service, the family and relatives were photographed. This activity lasted a half hour because of the large number of relatives involved. The grand finale included seventy-five relatives being photographed together.

Later in the afternoon, the relatives and close friends assembled for a formal dinner. A Mexican American band played for those in attendance. Brief speeches and several toasts accompanied the dinner for the newlyweds. A national guard armory
served as the site of an evening dance. The decorations included gold and black crepe paper and balloons. Some small children played among a pile of balloons. The evening began with another ceremony. The band played a slow march to accompany the formal entrance of the bridesmaids, groomsmen, and the newlyweds. The couple then danced alone. Following this dance, the bridesmaids and groomsmen joined the couple and all danced in a circle of unity.

An additional ritual is the dollar dance in which guests pay a dollar to dance with the bride or groom. The dollar is pinned on the clothes of the couple. One subject reported that she had $156 dollars pinned to her wedding dress at the end of the evening. The money is meant to provide assistance for the couple's honeymoon. The wedding couple also received the standard wedding cake, presents, and champagne.

The evening dance involved the entire Mexican American community. People did not need an invitation to attend this dance. A Mexican American wedding is a community cultural event that incorporates many key elements of Mexican American culture, all of which promote community solidarity. Approximately 400 Mexican Americans of all ages attended the dance I witnessed; it was a joyous celebration of community.

**Quinceañeras**

The Quinceañera is another Mexican American cultural ceremony. This ceremony, at a girl's fifteenth birthday, celebrates the rite of passage for Mexican American girls. Not all Mexican American girls have Quinceañeras; the family's economic status and degree of assimilation are the determining influences on the family's decision to hold this ceremony. The elaborateness of the ceremony depends on the financial status of the family.

Paula's ceremony began with a Catholic mass in which she renewed her pledge to Catholicism. Paula wore a formal dress, as did also the fourteen girls in attendance. The fourteen boys in the ceremony wore tuxedos. A Mexican American woman made the girls' dresses.
Father Correra lectured Paula on her new responsibilities. He instructed her to find a role model to guide her in her new adult responsibilities. The priest told Paula that the Mother of Christ would serve as the appropriate model. He then lectured all of the adolescents in attendance, urging them to avoid being self-centered. He lectured the parents concerning their parental responsibilities. The priest finished his admonishments by telling those gathered that, “I will be by God’s side. When you die, if you attempt to tell God that you did not know how to behave as God wants, that you did not know better, I will go ‘psst, psst.’ I will whisper in God’s ear, ‘I told them.’ You will not have any excuses.”

After the mass, a photographer took pictures of Paula with her family and friends. Approximately 150 people attended the mass and dinner at the family’s home where seven women were preparing food. Father Correra received special attention: he and the men ate first. Most ate outside under makeshift shades constructed of tarps to protect the guests from the sun. Paula’s working-class family could not afford all of the expenses for this ceremony, so the family’s padrinos shared in these expenses.

An evening dance serves as the culminating event of the Quinceañera. The masters of ceremony introduced all of the padrinos and noted the gifts they brought for Paula. These included a cake, a rosary, a Bible, a kneeling cushion, flowers, a necklace, rings, and a veil, among other gifts. Additionally, more than fifty sponsors contributed money for the celebration.

The specific events of the Quinceañera included the father and daughter dancing the first dance together. The attendants then performed two dances. Paula later returned in a plain dress to dance with a doll. At the end of this dance she threw the doll into a crowd of small girls. Throwing away the doll symbolized Paula’s departure from childhood. Approximately 350 people attended this Quinceañera. A Mexican American band played for the dancers well into the night. People of all ages participated in the dancing. The Quinceañera represents another traditional Mexican American ceremony that unites the people and preserves the culture.
Other Cultural Events

Héctor Manzanares lives in the country. In the field next to his house nearly one hundred large drums rest on the ground. In front of each drum a colorful rooster is attached by a cord to a stake in the ground. The drums provide makeshift shelters for the roosters. Hector raises and trains several special breeds of fighting cocks. He claims to have special knowledge on how to breed and train the best cocks. The cockfights occur on a regular basis during the summer.

Mexican American males, having been notified by word-of-mouth, gather at designated areas to wager and watch the fights. Cockfights and the attendant betting are illegal, but few arrests occur. Hector claims that he has won as much as $20,000 in a year. Attached to each leg of the roosters are razor blades to hasten the death of one of the combatants. The cheering, betting, and the bloody fights fill the air and the senses with excitement, similar to a boxing match. Feathers, dust, and blood fly.

Some older Mexican Americans reported on another cultural practice—curanderismo. They prefer traditional female healers (curanderas) over medical doctors. Curanderas' techniques include the use of herbal teas, artifacts, bits of colored cloth, and certain incantations to cure physical and psychological problems. My interviewees had a limited knowledge of these practices. Most Middlewest Mexican Americans view folk healing as an old-fashioned practice.

Housing

Culture also refers to the mundane aspects of life. The pattern and style of Middlewest's Mexican American housing reveal aspects of culture, economic status, and degree of adaptation to the dominant culture. A high concentration of Mexican Americans is found in three areas of Middlewest. The area's first Mexican American residents lived in the labor camp, which provides substandard housing that is the equivalent of a ghetto. Local farmers and government built these housing units.
Across the proverbial tracks in Middlewest is the “Chicago District” where most Mexican Americans live. This section of town generally has the poorest quality of housing; few Anglos live there. Small, overcrowded houses dot the landscape in various states of disrepair. This section of Middlewest, in the classic minority tradition, has a reputation for violence, gangs, and drug trafficking. According to one real estate agent, the average price of homes in the Chicago district is $15,000. The interiors feature inexpensive second-hand appliances and furnishings. Many run-down trailer houses are scattered throughout the district. The city has not provided curbs and gutters. Because the houses are small, the area’s children spend most of their time on the streets.

Mexican American houses here generally lack garages, which results in a visible clutter of cars in the neighborhood. Most Mexican Americans drive large, older American cars; few drive foreign or compact cars. Assuredly, the financial situation of most Mexican Americans accounts for the well-worn appearance of their cars. Some young Mexican American men drive “low riders.” The name derives from the fact the car’s shock absorbers have been modified to allow the car’s frame to be close to the ground. These cars have little chrome and their metallic paint presents a sharp contrast to the dull and rusted colors of most cars in the neighborhood.

A few small businesses exist in the Chicago district, including a grocery store, a TV-repair shop, a laundromat, a gas station, and two tiny Mexican restaurants. Several homes in the district function as small fundamentalist churches. Some Anglos will not walk in the Chicago district after dark, and pizza companies will not deliver there after dark. The barrio of Middlewest is unlike its urban counterpart because of its small size and limited services.

A third Mexican American section of town is called “Little Mexico.” This is a small subdivision built with federal housing funds under the direction of the Idaho Migrant Council. The project required that families assist in building each other’s houses. These modest homes have a quality superior to those in the Chicago district.
Not all Mexican Americans live in these three sections of Middlewest. Some of the more affluent Mexican American families rent or own homes in the Anglo sections of Middlewest.

The walls of most Mexican American homes contain two symbolic displays: religious artifacts such as inexpensive biblical-scene paintings, crosses, and pictures of Jesus; and family photos, primarily of weddings and children. These interiors reaffirm the importance of family and church in Mexican American culture.

Most Mexican Americans do not believe that divisions exist within the Mexican American community, but some see a division between migrant and permanent resident Mexican Americans. Some resident Mexican Americans dislike the migrant workers; they feel that the migrants give all Mexican Americans a bad image. They also believe that the migrants take their jobs and depress the wage scale. Nevertheless, most Mexican Americans in Middlewest have a family history of being migrant workers, so considerable solidarity exists within the Mexican American community.

“Oreos”

Mexican Americans, because they live in a predominantly Anglo community, cannot escape being influenced by Anglo perceptions of Mexican Americans. For example, the predominantly marginal Mexican American students resent the few Mexican American students who excel. Marginal Mexican American students often view teachers and administrators as enemies; they may not be able to articulate their grievances, but a latent hostility smolders in these students. Having little ability to alter their status or attack the Anglo school personnel, these students label a successful Mexican American student an “Oreo,” a chocolate cookie with white (Anglo) filling. (Many people associate the use of the term Oreo with an African American who has become assimilated.) The logic generally fits: the successful Mexican American students have Anglo friends, they like their teachers, and they have a higher degree of assimilation. This leads to their being criticized for rejecting their ethnic roots.
During the course of my field research, two local Mexican American high school girls transferred to a country school because they were distraught over the resentment of their fellow Mexican Americans.

Mexican American professionals and businessmen also can be targets of attack. They also have Anglo friends and professional contacts. These Mexican Americans are commonly classified as "wanabes," persons wanting to be something they are not. Mexican American leaders who have dedicated their lives to assisting the Mexican American community become targets of many forms of criticism that vary from comments that they are "only working for their own self-interests" to they "think they are better" than their fellow Mexican Americans. Sadly, the poverty-stricken Mexican Americans misdirect their hostility toward Mexican Americans who have become successful. Displaced anger occurs because it is difficult to hate abstractions such as the Anglo system. Mexican Americans recognize that they have a subordinate position in Middlewest, but they lack the vocabulary to articulate their grievances.

Types of Adaptations

Some Mexican Americans internalize the stereotypes that Anglos have of Mexican Americans. For example, certain Mexican Americans accept the dominant view that their culture promotes crime and poverty. Mary Archuleta works for the state. She has a defeated demeanor because unconsciously she perceives Mexican Americans to be inferior. In a public meeting she voluntarily apologized for the criminal activity of Mexican Americans in Middlewest. A Mexican American laborer criticized his fellow Mexican American workers for being too pushy; Armando Castillo, who works for a feed company, said that he never has any problems at work because he knows his place.

Several Mexican American women I met had very low self-esteem. Lupe Pantoja has worked on the trim line of a potato processing plant for fifteen years. She expressed interest in obtaining a GED certificate and enrolling in a vocational program. Lupe said her husband tries to encourage her and she hates her
five dollar per hour job, yet her lack of confidence immobilizes her.

Mexican American culture in Middlewest lacks uniformity. The Mexican American community is continuously being renewed by new arrivals from Texas and Mexico. Their ethnicity can be measured on a continuum similar to that described in the work of Keefe and Padilla (1987). At one end of the continuum are those Mexican Americans who retain a high degree of ethnicity that closely parallels the traditions of Mexico. These people usually are older, were born in Mexico, have relatives in Mexico, have less formal education, speak mostly Spanish, and have migrated from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. They have a high level of participation in Mexican American cultural activities.

A few Mexican Americans who have a high level of assimilation are found at the other end of the continuum. Their characteristics include younger age, more formal education, less speaking of Spanish, middle-class employment, fewer ties to Mexico, long residence in Middlewest, more Anglo friends, and less participation in the Mexican American cultural activities.

Many Mexican American leaders become bicultural because of their high interaction with people of both races. They feel comfortable in both Mexican American and Anglo settings. The Mexican American community of Middlewest commonly recognizes three types of Mexican American ethnicity, corresponding to the three generations of Mexican Americans living in Middlewest. Mexican Americans believe that each generation has become less Mexican American, but they think that even the third generation retains considerable ethnicity. The most visible difference in ethnicity occurs when grandparents who speak only Spanish are unable to communicate with their English-speaking grandchildren. Mexican American teenagers enjoy the popular culture of the dominant society, which causes some conflict with their more traditional parents. Migrants tend to have a higher level of Mexican American ethnicity than resident Mexican Americans. While walking in the Middlewest Labor Camp, one hears primarily Spanish music on the radios; but in the other Mexican American sections of town English-language stations are heard.
An important factor in the retention of Mexican American culture is the colonial status and subordinate position of most Mexican Americans in Middlewest. A key feature of the social relations in Middlewest and Farm County is the Anglo community's control of the important social institutions of society. The Anglo community, though it does not acknowledge it, effectively prevents most Mexican Americans from participating in Anglo institutions. Most Mexican Americans work in the secondary job market. Their lower class position results in a unifying of the Mexican American community; thus their culture works to protect their self-image.

**Anglo Perspective**

Among Anglos in Middlewest, knowledge of the Mexican American community often consists of a deviant image created by the criminal justice system and the mass media. Most do not know or care to know about Mexican American culture. An Anglo minister commented:

Race relations are not good; I am not sure they will get better. Some of the churches are concerned about it, but [there has been] not much success. The gang culture makes it hard; lot of prejudice, just a lot of prejudice against the Spanish. We don't know what to do; you hear things like I am sure you would have heard like the South with blacks. People resent a Spanish person buying a house in their neighborhood or even renting a house. This person across the street is Spanish. He keeps his place immaculate; in fact, that place had a number of Anglo renters, it was a trash heap. Since he has been in it, it is clean. People comment on how unusual it is, he is a clean Mexican.

Idaho commemorated its statehood centennial in 1990. In Boise, the state capital, there were several days of celebration. The gala event consisted of an evening of entertainment. All the minority groups in Idaho participated, except the Mexican Americans, who are by far the largest minority group in Idaho.
Basque dancers performed. This ethnic group from Spain has a longer history in Idaho than do the Mexican Americans, and the Basques have become highly assimilated. Juan Celedón, a Mexican American leader, said, “It is as though we [Mexican Americans] do not exist in Idaho. The state has never recognized our contributions to Idaho. It is as though we don’t exist.”

Assimilation

Approximately 20 percent of the Anglos in Middlewest report that they have Mexican American friends. Yet when asked to elaborate on the degree and closeness of the friendship, the interviews reveal that most of these friendships lack intimacy and closeness. The Mexican American friend commonly is not invited to dinner.

The typical interracial friendship occurs as the result of the Mexican American person having achieved a high level of assimilation. The Mexican American who is most “eligible” for friendship has more education, a better job, speaks fluent English without an accent, and has a lighter skin color than the majority. Many Mexican Americans claimed their Anglo friends did not see them as Mexican American, and some maintained that their Anglo friends commonly commit faux pas by talking derogatorily about Mexicans. A Mexican American women commented: “I am driving my son and his three Anglo friends to their soccer game in Boise. They are in the back seat and they begin talking about the other team and one of the Anglo boys says that the other team has a lot of mean and dirty Mexicans on it. They did not see my son as a Mexican.”

Such incidents reveal the irony of race and ethnic relations—Anglos can have Mexican American friends and yet remain intolerant. Also since they have a Mexican American friend, they can more easily maintain a self-perception of being non-racist.

Separate Communities

While in many ways Middlewest has two separate communities, one Anglo and one Mexican American, some social and
cultural events attract both races. Most Mexican Americans who live permanently in Middlewest consider themselves Americans and celebrate American holidays. They participate to a greater degree than Anglos in the celebration of the local Christmas parade and the Fourth of July celebration.

The Middlewest park and swimming pool attract many people in the summer. Both races use the swimming pool but the childrens' play often remains separated by race. Picnics in the park typically are divided by race.

Sports

The people of Middlewest avidly participate in sports activities. Mexican Americans participate in sports more than in any other Anglo social institution, including little league baseball, high school sports, and adult softball teams. Mexican Americans generally feel less discriminated against in sports; Mexican Americans and Anglos play on integrated teams. Mexican American players, however, do not participate proportionally to their percentage of the town’s population. Some Mexican American parents cannot afford to buy their children the necessary sports equipment.

The schools reward and the local newspaper reports the accomplishments of Mexican American athletes. However, some Mexican American parents believe that the Mexican American athlete has to be significantly better in order to receive an opportunity to play. Mexican American parents think their children do not receive as much encouragement as do Anglo children.

Sports provides another example of the situational nature of racism. I observed two young Anglo men I had interviewed playing softball in the park with teams that included Mexican American members. These Anglo athletes interacted in a congenial fashion with their Mexican American teammates although in their interviews they had both spoken disparagingly about Mexican Americans.

Some sports still basically lack integration. Mexican Americans account for less than two percent of the membership in the
local golf clubs. Golf remains a middle-class sport and Mexican American golfers are from that social class.

Many Mexican American males in Midwest enjoy boxing. Several Mexican American teenagers participate in Tony Ocha's boxing program. Boxing and minority status seem to go together; boxers attempt to exchange their poverty status for esteem through the sport. Ocha, a former boxer, coaches Mexican American boxers in his garage. He has coached for years, without pay, because he feels that someone has to work with the kids and help keep them out of trouble. He believes the sport improves the boys' self-esteem, while he and the boys also have fun participating in the sport.

Conclusions

My field research on the Mexican American community reflects findings that are similar to those found in the ethnographic work of Blea (1980) and Horowitz (1986). The material in this chapter also supports the conclusions of Keefe and Padilla (1987), who found that Chicanos in their community studies retained a strong sense of ethnicity. As many previous sociological researchers have noted, the vitality of the Mexican American community is sustained by family life, religious rituals, cultural celebrations, and community life.

The Mexican American community provides an ongoing set of social, religious, and artistic events that bring the community together, while at the same time these activities reinforce ethnic traditions. The Mexican American family is the primary social institution that carries on the day-to-day features of the culture. The family setting is the arena in which children learn Spanish, eat Mexican food, attend church with their parents, and learn the values and attitudes of their culture.

Mexican Americans commonly have large families and close relationships with their relatives. A Mexican American easily can have an extended family approaching thirty people. This individual will also have a set of compadres and padrinos who function as surrogate relatives. This means that most Mexican Americans in Midwest have a strong support system
of people who regularly join together for social and religious activities.

Many Mexican American cultural activities are religious in nature. Weddings, funerals, baptisms, and Quinceañeras all take place in a religious setting. Religion influences the day-to-day life of most Mexican Americans. The religious values along with the typically large families place a greater emphasis on the group than on the individual. Benefits include the sharing of resources and the providing of emotional support. It is taken for granted that assistance is to be provided to any member of the extended family. Warmth and intimacy are readily created by the extended family, and this intimacy is extended beyond the family setting into the larger cultural group.

The life of Mexican Americans in Middletown and Farm County is punctuated with cultural activities that include singing, dancing, and music. These activities include family gatherings with guitar music; going to a weekend dance with a Mexican band; a group of girls organized to perform traditional dances; and the more elaborate performances of music, dance, and singing that accompany weddings, Quinceañeras, Cinco de Mayo, and September the Sixteenth celebrations.

Mexican American life has a set of values that sometimes sharply contrast with those of the Anglo culture. Mexican Americans place less value on individualism, competition, and economic success. Mexican American life in some ways is similar to the more traditional Anglo culture of the past, when religion and family played a larger role in people's lives. Many Americans yearn for a revival of those traditional values.

A considerable portion of Mexican American life in Middletown is shaped by the treatment the people receive from the dominant society. Many in the Anglo community have stereotyped Mexican Americans as criminals and welfare cheats. If Anglos would get beyond these stereotypes and learn about Mexican American culture, it is likely that they would gain a respect for the Mexican American people. Most Mexican Americans live in poverty because they work in the secondary job market.
The social interaction between Mexican Americans and Anglos fluctuates. Members of both races get involved in activities to improve race relations. Each race, at times, alienates the other. The problem is that once Middlewest has created two essentially separate communities, many individuals, social groups, and local institutions then unconsciously perpetuate the divisions within the community.

The social nature of human beings in many ways inhibits positive race relations. People naturally become friends with their work associates and with those who belong to the same church, and they have difficulty relating to those of a different social class. People naturally assist those most similar to themselves. People today have to work hard to survive and they feel as though they have little time to work at improving race relations. Ironically, Anglos demand conformity and assimilation, but their behavior and institutions often deny or inhibit the active participation of Mexican Americans. Anglos say, “Assimilate and we will accept you,” but Mexican Americans can only become assimilated when they are allowed to have opportunities to participate fully in the schools, employment, politics, and religious services of Anglo Middlewest.

Race relations between Anglos and Mexican Americans in Middlewest would improve if there was a significant increase in the social interaction between them. Racial harmony would be enhanced if Mexican Americans were to have the same opportunities as Anglos to gain an education, obtain a job, and have political representation. In such a situation, Mexican Americans would become more fully bicultural—participating in the Anglo culture while still retaining their cultural roots.

Mexican Americans come to Idaho because they want to work and make a decent living for their families. Many come with limited formal education and without the ability to speak fluent English. Instead of assisting these new arrivals to their community, Anglos too often respond with avoidance and derision.

Anglos in Middlewest need to recognize that they are part of the problem. It is not Mexican American culture that causes poverty and crime; instead, it is people in social institutions and situations. Anglos would do well to stop demanding that
Mexican Americans change and become like them; they need to learn that if they truly start to educate Mexican American kids instead of unintentionally pushing them out of the schools, there will be greater racial harmony and social justice. Mexican Americans need to be paid living wages; police and courts must stop using selective enforcement of the laws against Mexican Americans; the media should work to create a positive image of Mexican Americans; the churches should stop having separate services for Mexican Americans; politicians should endeavor to provide adequate social services for Mexican Americans. When any or all of these things are done, there will be more racial harmony and social justice in Middlewest.

The tragedy in Middlewest is that in general Anglos reject, demean, and victimize the Mexican American community and then compound the tragedy by blaming the victim.