A CITY'S LATINOS

Immigrant community of Latinos emerging

HISPANIC FROM PAGE A-1

on sleeping pads on the floor, in an apartment provided by the restaurant owner. They call him *el patron*, a term that carries the connotation of a strong, paternal boss.

"An Anglo might not even notice them in a Chinese restaurant," says Miguel Sague, leader of Guaracha, one of Pittsburgh's best-known Latino bands, which provides the dancing music on this particular Saturday night. "But they are here. In the city, and in the suburbs as well."

Although Pittsburgh's Latino population is small compared to many communities, it is nonetheless growing. There were 9,700 Latinos in Allegheny County at the end of 1994, according to the most recent Census Bureau estimate available, up from 8,700 in 1990 — a 12 percent increase in just three years. Their population in the five-county metropolitan area of Pittsburgh was 16,000, and 300,000 in the state as a whole.

This is still a small portion of the overall population — around 2 percent statewide, a little under 1 percent in the Pittsburgh area — but as is the case elsewhere, Hispanics are the fastest-growing group, their numbers increasing 2 to 3 percent a year while most other groups are generally losing population. Magee-Womens Hospital has enough Spanish-speaking patients to require the services of a part-time translator.

Those who have been watching the trend agree that the last few years have been ones of steady growth, and suggest that the actual figures, if illegals were counted, would be much higher.

Pittsburgh's growing population of illegals mirrors a national trend. The United States is now home to more than 7 million Hispanics here illegally, according to Census Bureau estimates. The Hispanic population has grown significantly in the last year or so as the Mexican economy deteriorated, sending greater numbers across the border in search of work.

With public anger over illegal immigration intensifying, Congress is now considering the adoption of the most restrictive changes in the country's immigration laws in 71 years. In addition, the federal government has for the past year stepped up its policing and surveillance of the Mexican border, seeking to choke off illegal crossings with limited success.

No one knows how many of Pittsburgh's recent Hispanic arrivals are here illegally. While observers may disagree over the size and scope of the illegal population here, they agree that the majority of Latinos here are legal. Some marry U.S. citizens; some come on tourist visas and work for short periods; some get green cards and stay longer.

Nate Guidry/Post-Gazette

Peruvian Pascal Laos, left, and Mayra Acosta of the Dominican Republic cut the rug to Latin music at the Cozumel restaurant in Shadyside on a Saturday night.

And not all laborers are undocumented; many farm workers in the Pittsburgh area, for instance, are legal U.S. residents. And Pittsburgh's core Hispanic population has a high number of professionals and academics, people who are cosmopolitan, well-educated and bilingual.

The newcomers, says Sague, are "young — as young as 14 — they're bachelors, and they're coming for one thing: work." Many left provincial towns in Mexico, El Salvador or Guatemala in search of work. Some tried to make it in Mexico City or other large metropolitan areas before deciding to go north. Some come to Pittsburgh because they have friends or relatives here.

And apparently a number are coming with a job already in place. According to several people interviewed for this article, some Pittsburgh restaurateurs are part of a network, illegal under U.S. federal law, in which border agencies link employers and would-be employees.

"The worker pays this agency $200. They get the name and address of a place in the States. They have to pay their own way to get there, but once they do, they have a job, room and board," says a Salvadoran who lives here and is acquainted with a number of Mexicans and Central Americans here.

Often the network is less formal. "A restaurant has a Mexican dishwasher," says Hector Mendoza, a Peruvian who has lived in Pittsburgh for several years and worked in the restaurant business. He is married to an American. "The owner says to him, 'Do you have a cousin, a friend? Tell them to come, they can have a job here.' It's all word of mouth."

That's how the 22-year-old man came. "I was in Chicago for about two years. Then someone told me about a job here and I came for that," he says.

Rigoberto Hernandez also heard about a job in Pittsburgh after stints elsewhere. He's worked in Chicago, New York and California. A friend told him about a job in Squirrel Hill five years ago. He worked there for a couple of years, returned to his home in San Salvador for a year or so, and now he's back, working as a waiter in a Cranberry restaurant. His brother is a cook in a Mt. Lebanon restaurant.

In a noisy bar on a cool Saturday night, Hernandez talked about his life. He wore baggy shorts, loafers with no socks, a Dallas Cowboys T-shirt, Pirates cap, and drank a Coors Light. He says he has a green card that he paid a lawyer a lot of money to get.

He likes Pittsburgh because it's "tranquil." He is at ease with his life here, proud of his driver's license and growing mastery of things gringo. But he plans to return to his family in San Salvador, living there until it's time for another trip north. "Esta bien aqui, esta bien alla" — "It's good here, it's good there" — he says.

Like his fellow workers, Hernandez puts in long hours, often from morning set-up to late night clean-up after closing, five or six days a week. The men interviewed for this article said they were paid either a flat monthly salary of $800 to $1,000 or an hourly rate ranging from $1 to $6 — wages that are generally paid under the table.

Hernandez earns $30 a day plus tips. With room and board provided by the restaurant owner, he's been able to send money home to San Salvador, buy a used sports car and return home by air.

Others don't allow themselves even those luxuries. "I've seen 12, 15 to a room," Mendoza says. "You come in and see rolled-up foam pads lining the walls. This is their modus vivendi." They walk to work and rarely go out except to send money and letters home. A number of people who work in mailing-service stores said that they send money regularly for clients to Mexico and Central America.

Yet for many, it is a big improvement over anything they could get in their home country.

There is one indication that the next phase in the typical immigration cycle — where the families are brought to join the immigrants — may be starting. Within a network of families with some connection to the Latino community, there are offers of child care or house-cleaning from wives who have come to join their husbands here. And some men meet and fall in love with local women, and make their homes here.

But Mendoza thinks the process of forming a true community will take a long time. "These people come to work, not to make a life here. They work hard, send money home, and return home. When things get tough, they come again. They go home on a plane and return over the border."

SEE HISPANIC, PAGE A-23

Invisible group works to become a community

By Lillian Thomas

There's no barrio, no Spanish-language television stations, no large religious or political organizations. But a Latino community is thriving in the Pittsburgh area, its members bound together by the very qualities that make them invisible to the population at large: education, economic success, fluency in English.

The Pittsburgh-area Latino population is atypical in a number of ways. It represents the smallest percentage (0.9 percent) of the overall population of any major area in Pennsylvania. For Philadelphia the figure is 5.6 percent while in Lancaster it is 20.6 percent.

Pittsburgh Latinos are well-educated, with much higher percentages of high school and college graduates than other areas of the state. They have the highest per capita income of the 14 top Hispanic communities in Pennsylvania.

The fact that many Pittsburgh Latinos are professionals and academics makes it easy for them to blend into the community. Traditionally the population has been bilingual. Even the main Latino newspaper, Panorama (formerly Pittsburgh Hispanic), is almost entirely in English. The newsletter of the city's main Hispanic organization, the Latin American Cultural Union, publishes its articles in both English and Spanish.

"There are some who don't want to be identified as Latinos," says Kenneth Rodriguez, head of the Pittsburgh Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "We don't exist in people's minds as a community. There is no barrio, no one area where we live."

Another factor that mitigates against a single definable community is the diversity of Pittsburgh Latinos. Unlike many eastern cities, where the population is predominantly Puerto Rican, or other parts of the country where there are large concentrations of Mexicans, Pittsburgh has a mishmash of everything: Colombians, Peruvians, Venezuelans, Chileans, Salvadorans, Argentinians, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans.

About 30 percent of Allegheny County Hispanics are Mexican, 19 percent Puerto Rican and 4 percent Cuban, according to census figures. The remainder are listed as "other Hispanic." There are no updated figures broken down by country of origin, but in the city of Pittsburgh the percentage of Latin Americans is probably higher than anywhere else in the state.

Finally, because many Latinos came because of the city's universities, the population has been transient. People who are here for a short period are less likely to invest time and energy into joining or creating a strong local community.

Rodriguez says that the image of a transient population does not convey the full picture: "Most of the members of the Chamber have been here for many years — as much as 18 or 20 or more."

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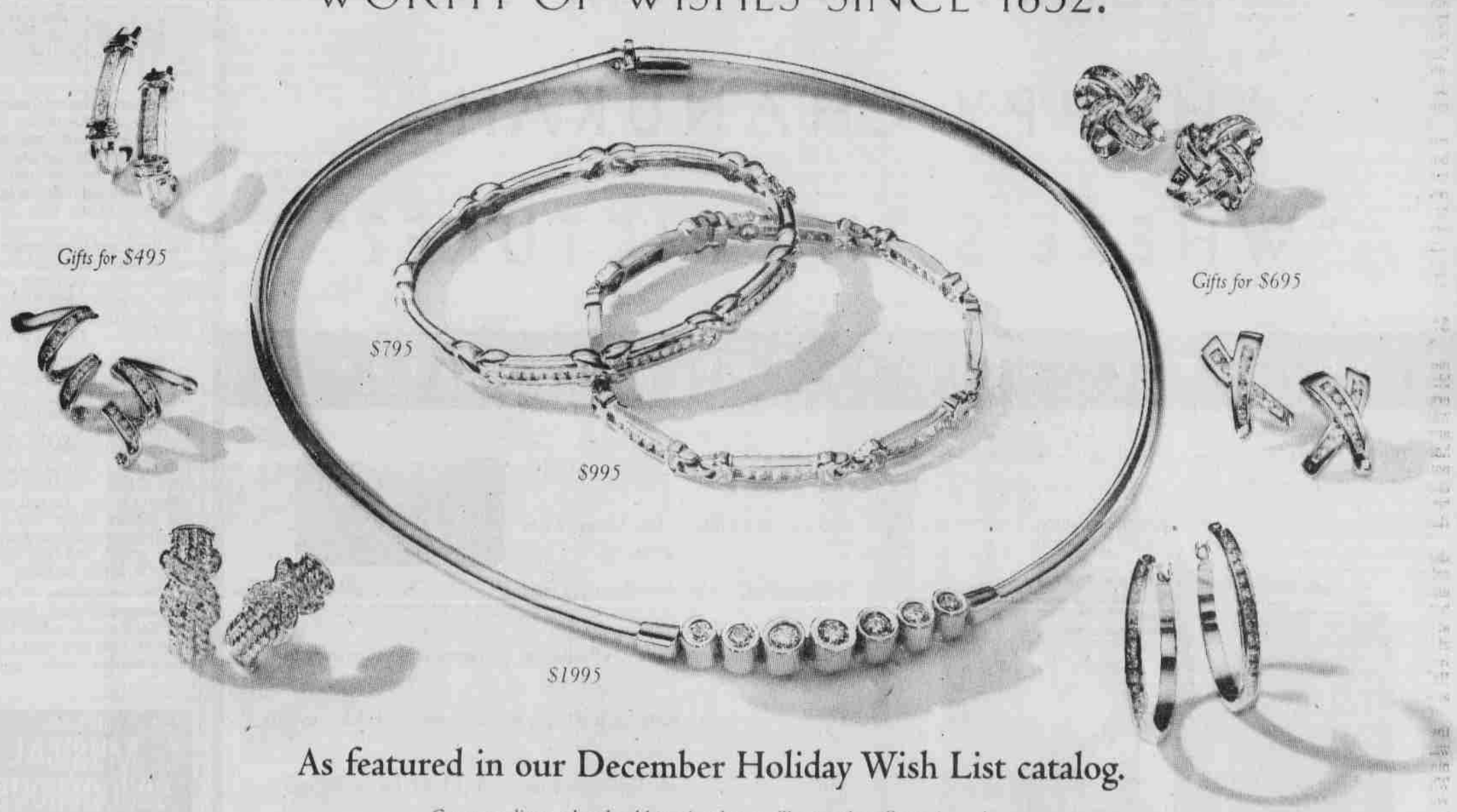

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