

## THE PUERTO RICANS

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The Puerto Ricans—those who emigrated to Hawai'i between 1900 and 1906, and their descendants—comprise one of the smaller ethnic groups in the Islands. The immigrants were a racially and culturally mixed group—predominantly Spanish, but with admixture from small numbers of other European settlers, from African slaves brought principally from the Guinea Coast, and from the aboriginal Indian population.

Puerto Ricans have not been counted by the census since 1950, but it is estimated there are 5,000 in the Islands, or less than one percent of the total. They are even more mixed today, of course, for they have intermarried freely with other ethnic groups.

The immigrants came because of both natural and man-made disasters at home—hurricane, epidemic, and a Spanish colonial regime which in four-and-one-half centuries had left Puerto Rico economically constricted, semi-feudal, its population fatalistic about its condition. Invasion by U.S. troops and the transfer of sovereignty from Spain was a major disturbance. Unemployment, the low living standards of an agricultural economy, subsistence farming, uncertainty over American occupation—all were factors contributing to a willingness to leave the homeland.

But emigration was a hot issue. Jose de Diego, poet and public figure, said: "Some American companies, in the horrendous industry of exploiting the good faith and the misery of our country people, or moved consciously or unconsciously by the desire or the intuition of driving the natives from their land, took thousands of unhappy peasants to Hawaii, Yucatán, and some other far country" (Falcón 1975).

Immigration began after a meeting in Washington, D.C., of Hawai'i and Puerto Rico commissioners who matched Puerto Rico's need to provide for the desperate plight of her people with the need in Hawai'i for cheap sugar plantation labor. They agreed that Puerto Rican families would be invited to immigrate to Hawai'i and settle and work there.



Many Puerto Ricans still remember the name of Albert E. Minville, Sr., the son of a Puerto Rican mother and American father, who recruited immigrants in his home area of southwestern Puerto Rico, which had been badly damaged by a hurricane. Coffee was the important crop of that district—a fact which led to much restlessness when migrants found themselves in the Islands' cane fields.

The Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) accepted only married couples and families, a requirement confusing at the time, for Puerto Rico had a high percentage of consensual marriages which, by tradition and durability, had acquired social legitimacy. Some of these couples did make the trip. Further, a number of single persons were able to pose as members of families. Most immigrants planned to return with enough money to buy and cultivate land at home, an intention that rarely materialized.

The first to leave, in late 1900, were 194 men, women, and children, but because of death and desertion fewer arrived. By 1906 almost 5,000 had made the trip. Through the years, many individuals left for the Mainland for various reasons, and most never returned. Students sent to Mainland trade schools and colleges seldom returned, choosing to remain where greater opportunity for varied employment and advancement existed.

The *jibaro*, the Puerto Rican peasant of the mountainous regions, has been described as poor, humble, independent, reticent with strangers, laconic, skeptical, hospitable, and humorous. He was also a poet-musician. Working together, two men would often spontaneously begin a *porfia*—a friendly composing and singing competition—each responding to the other in extempore verse. The *jibaro's* sense of *individualismo* and *personalismo* made him poor at teamwork. He demanded *respeto*, and felt that his manliness, or *machismo*, his *dignidad de la persona* were threatened if he did not receive *respeto*. The most jarring note in him was his fatalism. He was likely to accept any setback with a shrug of the shoulders, saying "*A quien Dios se lo da, San Pedro se lo bendiga*" (To whom God gives, let St. Peter bless).

This countryman, also called *campesino* in rural areas, was the taproot of the culture—a rarity, for the "ideal type" was not the rich or powerful, but rather the poor peasant.



Upon arrival in Honolulu, immigrants went through the usual fumigation and quarantine period. Distribution of families to plantations apparently lacked any pattern other than numerical apportionment. Groups were sent to Kaua'i, Maui, O'ahu, and Hawai'i. Life on each plantation varied according to the pleasure of each manager, and covered everything from utter lack of sensitivity to solicitous concern. On some plantations, workers were assigned living quarters separated by ethnic group, but others were assigned to houses in a random manner, making for some interesting, even humorous combinations and involuntary experiments in human relations. In Kohala, newly arrived Puerto Ricans were dismayed late one afternoon to see a group of naked Japanese marching toward their homes. The newcomers knew nothing about the Japanese custom of communal bathing, nor did they know that the bathhouses were located behind their own homes. Expecting the worst, the Puerto Rican men grabbed their trusted machetes to protect their women's honor, and the Japanese men took to their heels.

For a very long time ethnic background and skin color were significant determinants in the social structure of the Islands, and occupational stratification and hierarchy were determined largely along ethnic lines. For a long time the Puerto Rican found himself low man on the totem pole. His role was aggravated, between 1898 and 1917, by the fact that he was not an American citizen. Though he was a citizen of Puerto Rico—an American possession—that status had no significance internationally, for Puerto Rico had no diplomatic representation or facilities with which to protect its citizens abroad. Even when citizenship was granted, by the Jones Act of 1917, the Territory of Hawaii tried to prevent those rights from applying to Puerto Rican immigrants. The *Advertiser* of 2 May 1917 reported that Puerto Rican residents were not entitled to vote, and that those who had left their country prior to the previous March were not to be regarded as citizens. However, a Puerto Rican in Hawai'i brought a mandamus suit and on 23 October 1917 the Hawai'i Supreme Court reversed a lower court decision, holding that all Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens. With their citizenship—and the growth of military installations in Hawai'i with corresponding opportunities for employment—Puerto Ricans had access to much greater socio-economic mobility.

Puerto Ricans have been characterized as fun-loving, quick to sing and dance, to make music, to be gregarious. Their fiestas have fortified this impression.



It included the *baile* (the dance), food, drink, music, a chance to trade stories, to court, to meet friends. There are many excuses for celebration—baptisms, weddings, birthdays, saints' days, and such special Puerto Rican holidays as *El Día de San Juan*, *El Día de los Reyes*, and the Twelve Days of Christmas. These parties were popular, and have remained so. In rural areas, especially, many non-Puerto Ricans still attend.

Many of the dishes prepared for these occasions have joined the spectrum of cosmopolitan cuisine of the Islands. The *gandul*, a legume exclusively Puerto Rican, is used in several dishes. *Pasteles*, *frituras*, coconut desserts, and *lechón*—pig roasted on a spit—are especially popular. The sausages, *longaniza* and *morecillas*, and the breads, *pan dulce*, *pan de manteca*, and *pan de agua*, are also served.

While almost all the immigrants were Roman Catholics, some eventually abandoned that faith, and Pentecostalism was the most common alternative. Juan L. Lugo, converted to Pentecostalism in Honolulu by a missionary couple returning from China, returned to Puerto Rico in 1915, began proselytizing, and eventually established a seminary there.

There were sporadic efforts to preserve the Spanish language among the immigrants' children, often sponsored by the priests. A French priest formed a small class in Spanish in Hālawā, North Kohala, Hawai'i, early in this century. Some parents arranged with those immigrants who were literate to teach the children, often paying with meals. Others ordered *cartillas*, elementary reading textbooks, from Texas in order that their children might learn Spanish, but instruction was never formalized and the language began to disappear among the second generation. Today, the third generation play and dance to Latin music, but the words they sing must be memorized by rote.

Boxing has long been popular among Puerto Ricans, but their greatest enthusiasm in sports has been for baseball, and they established the extremely popular and durable Puerto Rican League, whose major center in the 1930s was Lanakila Park in Honolulu. Early teams used the names of towns their forebears had left behind—Arecibo, Mayaguez, and Ponce. Later, part-Puerto Ricans were allowed to play, and eventually the "Rican League" was enlarged to include such teams as the Fil-Americans, Army, Kaya Contractor, and Holsum Bakery.



As Puerto Ricans left the plantations, many moved to larger towns on Neighbor Islands, such as Hilo and Wailuku, where they could still maintain family ties and the familial support system. Following the Caribbean tradition, one family would place one or two older children in another's home while they went to school or sought work in the towns. The youngster would become *como familia*, one of the new family.

More families began moving to O'ahu, particularly the rural areas, and eventually there was movement into Honolulu, where some enclaves were formed. Although there was never a clear Puerto Rican section of the city at any time, there was a concentration of Puerto Ricans in Kālihi-Pālama. However, as better jobs brought higher income, Puerto Ricans began to disperse throughout O'ahu. Statistical documentation of this movement is available only to 1950. In that year 40.9 percent of Puerto Ricans in the Islands were in Honolulu, urbanization almost equal to that of the pure Hawaiians. In the same period, 28.5 percent of Island Filipinos and 80 percent of Chinese were in Honolulu.

Also in 1950, Filipinos had the highest proportion of employed males working as laborers, something just over half their total, while Puerto Ricans and pure Hawaiians were tied with the second highest proportion, at 34.5 percent. At that time only one percent of employed Puerto Rican and Filipino males were in the professions. Though no figures have been available since 1950, continued movement of Filipinos to the city, and away from common labor, is statistically evident and it is safe to assume similar trends among Puerto Ricans. It is apparent, though not documented, that Puerto Rican immigrants and their descendants have moved into the trades and professions, construction, factories, sales, the military, education, business and entertainment. Few have sought public office, but a notable exception was John Bulgo, who served on the Maui County Board of Supervisors from 1944 to 1953.

There is an active, statewide organization, the United Puerto Rican Association of Hawaii, Inc., created in November 1973 by merger of the Puerto Rican Civic Association (founded in 1931) with the Independent Puerto Rican Association (founded in 1932). The organization's scope has expanded from its early function of a "burial society" to an arena for the ventilation of common problems, a place to meet socially and to celebrate special occasions. In the



1930s and 1940s there was organization focus on political "clout," an emphasis which has been abandoned.

On the island of Hawai'i, the Kohala Puerto Rican Social Club—in informal existence for many years prior to 1958 but formally organized that year—has been preserving cultural roots. In 1976 there was a major effort to mark the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the first Puerto Ricans in Hawai'i and special commemorative events took place.

For the 80th celebration in 1980 the events were largely educational, with a state-wide pictorial exhibition, public forums and radio programs supported in part by the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities and sponsored by the Puerto Rican Heritage Society of Hawaii and the Hawaii Heritage Center. The society's focus is educational with plans for research, preservation of records, and dissemination of information.

Puerto Ricans have become virtually disconnected from the motherland. Since the last group migration of the early 1920s the community has not been replenished, except by isolated individuals. Puerto Ricans have intermarried with other ethnic groups and mixtures. About 75 percent of all Puerto Ricans who marry are marrying non-Puerto Ricans. The children and grandchildren are becoming one of the most rapidly growing multi-cultural groups in the Islands, choosing mores, traditions, and customs from several ethnic backgrounds.

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