



Family Letters: An Analysis of the Personal Correspondence of a Mexican American Family in the Midwest in the first half of the 20th Century

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Project Description

In this project we are digitizing, analyzing, transcribing and translating a collection documents in Spanish and English belonging to a family that migrated from Mexico to the Midwest in the first half of the 20th Century. We are examining the case of a family, whose members wrote letters back and forth from Mexico to the United States, over the course of six decades.

These letters give us a perspective of the daily life for Latinos in this region in the first half of the 20th Century. Our goal is to connect the family events described in these documents to the historical events of the time. Additionally, we seek to study the writing in these letters, because it includes examples of non-standard features and language contact phenomena that provide us with important clues about the Spanish used by Mexican immigrants who settled in this region.

Language Change

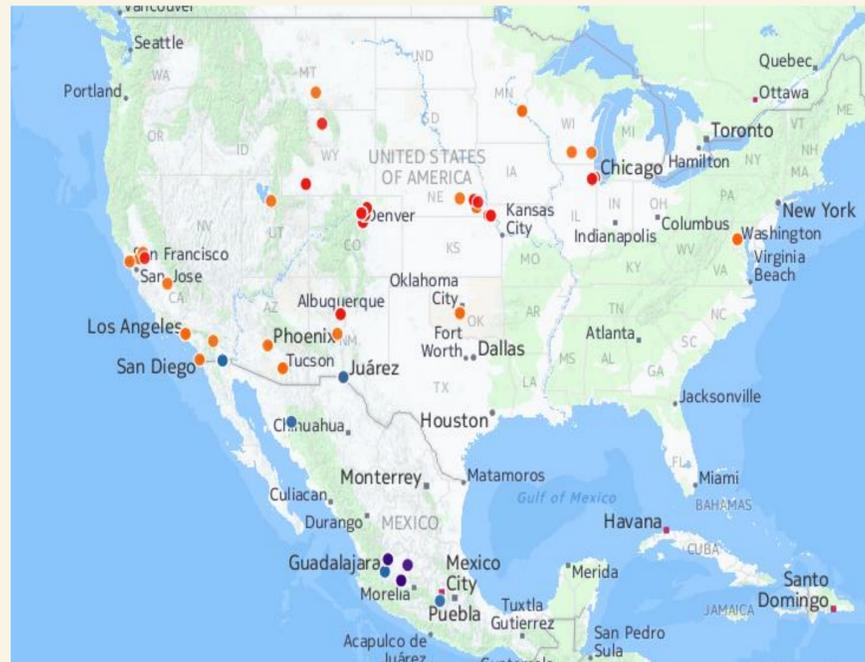
From the 195 letters and 118 documents in the collection, this summer we focused our analysis on 50 letters and 15 documents exchanged between a mother and a daughter in this family.

Through this stage of the project we looked for different linguistic features in the selected letters, and created a database that includes non-standard spelling, grammatical errors, and potential evidence of influence of English in Spanish writing.

After analyzing the mother's letters, we were able to identify patterns in her writing, her education level, the way in which she spoke and how little effect English had on her Spanish fluency after several decades. On the other hand, her adult daughter's Spanish writing was impressive for a second generation immigrant living in a town like Lincoln, Nebraska, where she had little to no interaction with other speakers of Spanish.

Research has been conducted on regions with high Latino populations, but very little research has been done on Latinos in the Midwest which is why this research is important. These letters tell a story that becomes relatable to other Latinos living in the Midwest.

The Story of a Family's Migration in Letters



These points represent the locations from which the letters in this collection were sent or received. Letters sent from Mexico are represented in blue, and those sent from the US appear in orange. Letters to an address in Mexico appear in purple, and those sent to an address in the US appear in red. Importantly, the points on this map do not represent all the letters sent by the members of this family over half a century, only those that survived and are now part of this collection.

Sent Documents		Mexico	
United States		Baja California	8
State	# Documents	Chihuahua	1
Arizona	3	Morelos	1
California	11	Jalisco	1
Colorado	126	Michoacan	1
Illinois	8	Sonora	1
Minnesota	2	Zacatecas	26
Nebraska	27	Received Documents	
New Mexico	28	United States	
Oklahoma	1	State	# Documents
Texas	4	California	1
Utah	1	Colorado	1
Wisconsin	1	Illinois	9
Wyoming	1	Nebraska	76
Washington D.C.	1	New Mexico	3
Unknown	1	Wyoming	5
		Mexico	
		Michoacan	4
		Zacatecas	1

Mapping Migration

One of our tasks this summer was to create a visual representation of this family's intergenerational migration patterns by mapping the locations from which these letters were mailed and received. We did this by experimenting first with various digital cartography programs including Palladio, Mapline, and CartoDB.

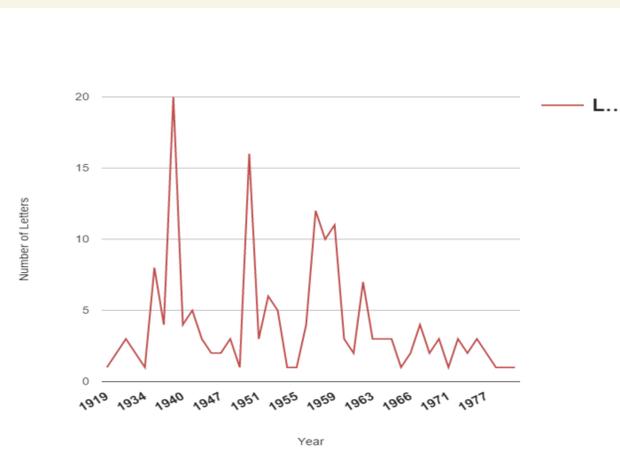
Other tasks included transcribing and translating the documents that will be used for analysis, and updating a database that includes all the place names mentioned in every item in the collection. Mapping is important to this project because it allows us to see patterns of migration in this family and possibly, the migration patterns of other Mexican American families at the beginning of the 20th century. With further investigation, we will be able to examine why such patterns exist, and whether they are due to major events such as war or the boom of industrial work.

Summer research objectives:

- Analyze linguistic features of letters and documents
- Learn about history and sociology of Mexican Americans
- Collect metadata for items in the collection
- Update database of placenames and personal names



Fourth of July picnic, Mexican American community, Fort Lupton, CO, ca. 1940. © Shanahan Collection.



What is digital scholarship?

It is an interdisciplinary field that seeks new approaches to the study of areas like linguistics, cultural anthropology, archaeology, classics, English, history, modern languages, literature, library science, and the arts through technological means.

Source: <http://unlcms.unl.edu/cas/center-for-digital-research-in-the-humanities/>

Metadata Collection

For the Metadata portion of the *Family Letters* project this summer we worked with UNL's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities to learn about encoding historical texts using the TEI framework in the XML Editor, *Oxygen*, and focused on creating Metadata for the letters in the collection.

Metadata is essentially data about data commonly used for the creation and functionality of websites. The metadata created for this project is in the XML metalanguage. The choice to use XML and to encode linguistic features within the letters will enable us to build a user-friendly website that will be more easily navigated by the public and researchers alike who are hoping to find specific document types, keywords, or linguistic features within the collection