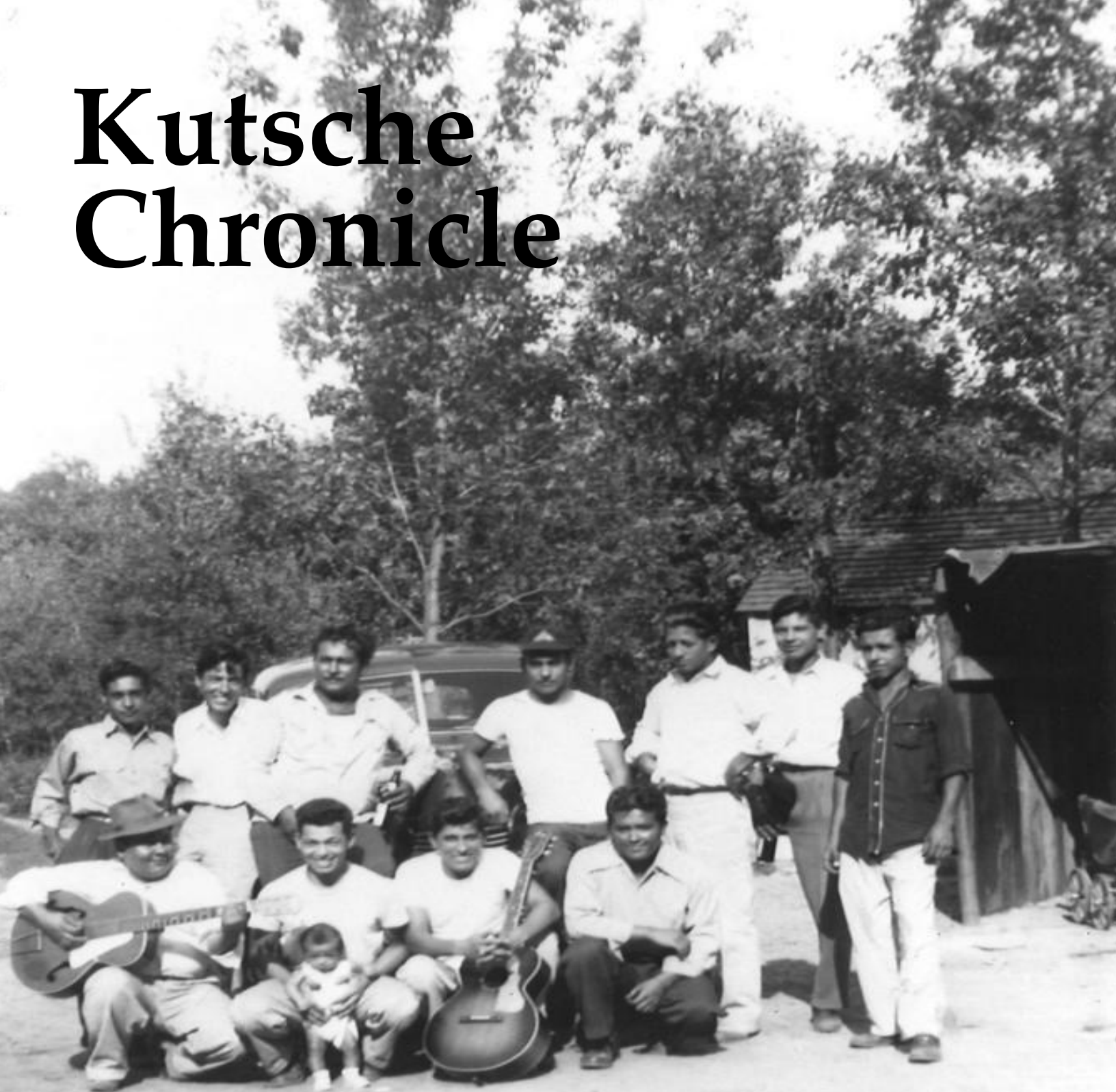


Kutsche Chronicle



The Kutsche Office of Local History
Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies
Grand Valley State University

Spring 2025

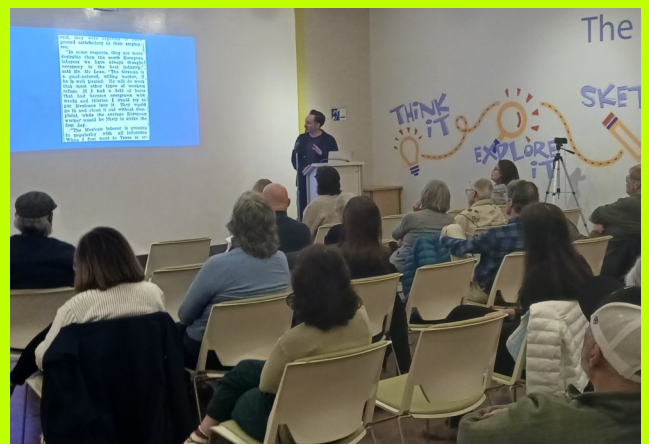
Mexican and Mexican American migrant baseball players at the Rancher del Pozo,
near Ottawa Beach Road, 1949

Image credit: Taken by Elodia Solis in the Holland Museums Digital Collection

Teaching West Michigan Histories Project Team Presents New Research in Holland

In March current and former staff of the Kutsche Office were honored to present some of our [Teaching West Michigan Histories Project](#) research at the [Holland Museum](#). The presentation was entitled, "Tracking Migration: Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Ottawa County, 1920-1950." It was co-presented by Director Nora Salas and current student Research Assistants Brooke Stewart and Sydney Nummerdor. Our staff was joined by our former Research Assistant Jaer Medina. Jaer is now a GVSU alum and Program Assistant at Cultureworks in Holland.

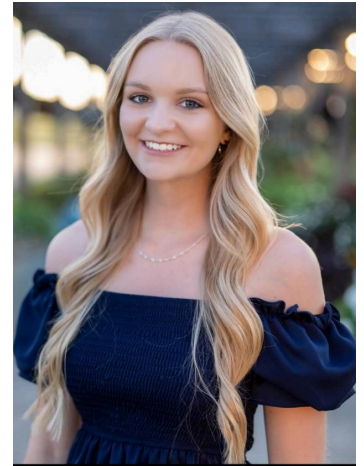
The presentation was a culmination of two years of student research on Mexican and Mexican American residents of Ottawa County. The research documents ethnic Mexicans' century of presence in Holland specifically, beginning with a small group recruited by the Holland St. Louis Sugar Company around 1920. Throughout this time people of Mexican descent in Holland struggled to find their place in a community which did not always accept them and their heritage. The presentation also touched upon the significance of Mexican and Mexican American people coming to a city so well-known for its Dutch heritage. Following the presentation a large audience asked great questions and sparked a meaningful conversation. Holland Museum's Executive Director Michelle Stempien and Curator of Learning and Community Engagement Loren Stevens deserve many thanks for setting up and promoting this event!



Photography by the Holland Museum

2025-26 Student Research Assistants Share Their Experiences

Brooke Stewart is a rising senior at GVSU studying Group Social Studies and Secondary Education. She is from Taylor, Michigan and is excited to be part of the Kutsche Office team!



"Since working at the Kutsche Office of Local History, I have conducted extensive research as part of the Teaching West Michigan History project. My research centered on identifying migrants of Mexican descent who lived in Ottawa County during the 1940's. Historical documents such as federal census records, newspapers, city directories, and birth and death certificates were used to help build family trees of these individuals. Sydney, Jaer, Dr. Salas, and I presented our research at the Holland Museum in March. I think that it was an incredibly rewarding experience to present these untold stories to an audience genuinely interested in learning about them. My work this year has deepened my understanding of local history and has taught me valuable skills that I will carry into my future career as an educator!"

Sydney Nummendor is a rising sophomore at GVSU studying Behavioral Neuroscience. She is from Clare, Michigan. Sydney had a great first year at GVSU, and learned valuable skills during her time at the Kutsche Office.



"Throughout this year, I have had the pleasure of working with the Kutsche Office on the Teaching West Michigan History project. Using sources such as census records, draft cards, death certificates, and other documents, we were able to learn valuable information about the lives of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans within Ottawa County. It was rewarding to be able to share our findings with interested community members in Holland, and I hope that our presentation will inspire more people to conduct their own research on little-known historical stories in their local communities!"

Roundtable Recap



*Gordon Olson Award
winner Ron Yob, Peg
Padnos, and Dr. Nora
Salas*



*"Reflections on the AIDS
Journey" panel*



*"Podcasts and
Community Storytelling"
panel*

*Photography by
Ty Corbett*

Thank you to everyone who helped make the 16th Annual Local History Roundtable a success! Each year we are so excited to share our communities' history with an engaging audience and this year was no exception.

The day began with "Reflections on the AIDS Journey in West Michigan: Public Health and Community Care," a moving retrospective on the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis in West Michigan. Our panelists for this session included Tommy Allen, Michelle Johnson-Houghton, Jan Koopman, Aaminah Shakur and Gary Van Harn. The panel was moderated by Harold Clarke-López. An important takeaway from this panel was the negative impact of hostile government policy and homophobia on the health and well-being of those living with HIV-AIDS. Equally worth remembering though were the efforts of community health care workers, members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies in pressuring for humane treatment.

Our second panel of the day, "Podcasts and Community Storytelling: Uncovering GRPS' History Together," featured Dr. Leanne Kang's work on Grand Rapids Public Schools' history. Dr. Kang was joined by two Interviewees from GRPS' past, Raul Ysasi and Jermar Sterling, as well as Betsaida Valdivia, the Urban Core Collectives' youth organizer and current high school students Mike Siguenza and Carmen Acevedo Hernández. Audience members appreciated the intergenerational perspective on our schools and were impressed by the leadership shown by current high school students. This panel emphasized that large community institutions rely on the contributions of people from many different perspectives and stages of life.

Roundtable Recap Continued

We rounded out the day with a compelling keynote address, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Cultivating the Ideals of the American Revolution on the West Michigan Frontier” by Dr. Anna-Lisa Cox. In her talk Dr. Cox discussed early African American settlers in West Michigan and their struggle to live out the equality and liberty fought for during the American Revolution. As we approach the 250th commemoration of that event Dr. Cox reminded us that the fight for diversity and political rights for all is not solely a modern one, it was also a goal of some during the founding era. In this way Dr. Cox emphasized that struggles for freedom, inspired by our West Michigan Histories, are ongoing in each generation. A special appreciation goes out to all our speakers who graciously donated their time and expertise for this year's Roundtable!

For those who could not make it in person, or if you want to review or share any of the day's talks, **full recordings of all panel sessions and keynote are now available on our YouTube channel:** bit.ly/kolh-rt

2025 Gordon Olson Award Recipient Ron Yob

Most will know the Grand Rapids native as the Chairman of the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians, a leadership position in which Yob has long worked to promote and preserve Anishinaabe history. Furthermore, Yob has excelled at developing partnerships with historical and educational institutions, including the Grand Rapids Public Museum and local colleges, as well as public and private K-12 schools. He has shared history through many mediums, working on museum



exhibits, historical markers, lectures, tours, and heritage focused events such as the annual Homecoming of the Three Fires gathering. The Gordon Olson Award Nomination Committee was impressed with how Yob's work has been a life-long project which honors our local history without erasing the contested meanings which mark both our past and present. Congratulations Ron!

Latinx Historical Marker Project Update

The Kutsche Office continues to partner with Dr. Delia Fernández-Jones from Michigan State University, the Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities (GAAH) and the Latino Community Coalition (LCC) on this project to erect State Historical Markers for three sites of significance to Latinx history of Grand Rapids. From its inception this project has been community led and focused on the process of public history as much as the “product” of the markers themselves. During this process new oral histories and documents have been collected, and current and past residents of the Grandville Avenue neighborhood have had a direct impact on how the history of their community will be told.

The Kutsche Office is excited to note that this process is now nearing completion for the first of the three historical markers at the former site of the St. Joseph the Worker church. The City of Grand Rapids is currently renovating this site into a new park. Ultimately the site will have both a memorial kiosk explaining the history of the community and the St. Joseph the Worker church as well as a State Historical Marker. The text of these markers will be based on information gathered as a part of the Latinx Historical Marker Project.

Even as this first marker site nears completion the project partners have continued moving forward. Next we will focus on the history of Roberto Clemente Park and the primarily Puerto Rican led baseball leagues that played there. From the 1940s through the early 2000s the park was an important site for recreation and community building. In early May the Puerto Rican Cultural Committee co-hosted an event with the Latinx Historical Marker Project partners to gather initial oral histories in a session at GAAH. Next, there will be a community screening day held at the park on August 9 to collect further stories and scan photos or documents. This will be hosted by the Puerto Rican Cultural Committee of West Michigan and partially funded by a grant they received from the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College in New York. **If you have information to share on this topic please get in touch at kutsche@gvsu.edu.**



*Dr. Delia
Fernandez-Jones*





Last October community members gathered to revise statements on the historical significance of St. Joseph the Worker Parish for the State Historical Marker application. This was one of many such events in a collaborative process.

Learn more at
latinocommunitycoalition/latinx-historical-marker-project



Photography by Luis Fernandez

Kang Grant Continues

The Kutsche Office of Local History has awarded Dr. Leanne Kang the Community Collaboration Grant for Winter 2025. Kang and her community partners will receive nearly \$11,000 to support “Community Historians Workshops: Telling the GRPS Story Together,” a continuation of her previous project with GRPS. Professor Kang, the Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives, and the Grand Rapids People's History Project will host up to five workshops focused around a decade, critical event, or theme.



The project will continue to investigate how GRPS has evolved since the 1968 closure of South High School, which was the city's most minority-serving institution and the only school closed when the entire GRPS system was forcibly integrated. [Podcast interviews from Dr. Kang's previous project can be found on Apple Podcasts.](#)

Stay tuned for project updates, podcast releases, and community events!

Thank You For Your Support

Supporting the Kutsche Office of Local History advances Dr. Paul Kutsche's vision of using history to give voice to diverse communities. As a bridge between academic and public history, we help amplify West Michigan stories while fostering the next generations of local historians.

In the past year, backing from our generous donors allowed us to provide invigorating, enriching and well-compensated local history internships for students like Sydney, Brooke and Community Collaboration Grant intern Bren Frick. Patrons helped fund our Local History Roundtable and our collaborations with local history organizations in Grand Rapids and Holland. In the coming year, we will continue to provide superb local history programming.

Donate today at
gvsu.edu/kutsche/donate