

Collection #
SC 3657

**FELICIANO AND MARIA ESPINOZA FAMILY COLLECTION
1927, CA. 1950S–1976, 2019**

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24 February 2023

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:	42 digital scans; audio recording of oral history interview; transcript of interview (not yet available)
COLLECTION DATES:	1927, ca. 1950s–1976 (digitized in 2019); 2019 interview
PROVENANCE:	Photographs and documents loaned for digitization by Connie Hamm, 2019
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ACCESSION NUMBER:	2019.0331
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BIOGRAPHICAL / HISTORICAL SKETCH

Feliciano “Felix” and Maria Espinoza established El Nopal Mexican Market, what may have been the first Mexican-owned Mexican grocery store in Indianapolis. In 1958 Feliciano served on the executive board of the first Club Social Mexicano in Indiana. He also served on the state’s first Commission on Latino Affairs, hosted the first Spanish language radio program in Indianapolis, and cofounded the Hispano-American Center. He was an activist and leader in the Indianapolis Hispanic community.

Feliciano was born in Texas on 20 October 1927. He married Maria Balli (born 2 February 1924) there in 1950. That same year, he moved to Indianapolis, where a friend lived, and where there was the prospect of a job in the railroad industry. Maria joined him the following year. Feliciano got a job with the railroad, eventually becoming a maintenance foreman. He retired from Conrail in 1988 as a track inspector. Neither Feliciano nor Maria could speak English when they first arrived in Indianapolis, but they overcame that obstacle.

Feliciano and Maria had eight children: Consuelo, Paula, Ricardo, Connie, Graciano, Isabel, and twins Olivia and Sylvia. The family lived in what was known as El Barrio, a small, ethnically diverse neighborhood with a strong Mexican presence on the east side of downtown. The family attended St. Mary’s Catholic Church on N. New Jersey Street.

By 1960, Feliciano and Maria opened El Nopal Mexican Market at their home at 810 E. North Street, with the store in the front of the house. Maria ran the store while Feliciano was working on the railroad. While operating the store, the family also carried merchandise to migrant camps in farmland as far north as Kokomo, allowing farmworkers access to familiar food and music. Feliciano was a master baker and prepared Mexican bakery items in one of the house’s two kitchens to sell in the store. He also made piñatas to sell in the store.

In 1969 the Espinoza family was forced to leave that house through eminent domain when Indianapolis was expanding its highway construction. The other residences and businesses in the neighborhood had already been removed, with the Espinoza family being the last holdouts. The people of El Barrio dispersed into various areas of the city. The family’s grocery then briefly operated as a stand in the City Market.

Amid his many other activities, Feliciano hosted a one-hour radio program on station WFMS that presented Mexican music and information on job opportunities. Richard Lugar, who was then running for mayor of Indianapolis, approached Feliciano to help him reach Hispanic voters. Feliciano campaigned for Lugar, and he also was active in Richard Nixon’s Indianapolis campaign for the presidency. On 20 January 1969, Feliciano attended Nixon’s inauguration festivities in Washington, DC.

In 1969, Feliciano, along with Fred Bowman, Tony Dominguez, and Tulio Guldner, organized the Hispano-American Association. At the time there were approximately six thousand Indianapolis residents of Hispanic descent. The majority were Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican. In 1971, with grants from the federal government and support from Mayor Richard Lugar’s office and several of the city’s churches, the Association founded the Hispano-American Center. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese offered the Saint Joseph parish hall at 617 E. North Street for its home.

The Hispano-American Center quickly became a source of social services and the hub of cultural activities for the city’s Latino and Hispanic community. The center initially

provided day care services, language classes, and job information. Eventually it provided other educational programming, employment and immigration counseling, information and referral services, and emergency assistance. In 1991 the name was changed to El Centro Hispano / The Hispanic Center. By 2003, the Hispanic population of Indianapolis had increased to more than 30,000 residents or four percent of the population. The community had also become more diverse, with Hispanic immigrants coming from twenty-one different countries. In January 2005, The Hispanic Center merged with the Hispanic Education Center and FIESTA Indianapolis into La Plaza, Inc.

Maria Espinoza passed away on 9 January 1992. She had worked as a home nutritionist at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis for five years. Feliciano Espinoza passed away on 18 February 2007. They were both buried in Calvary Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Sources:

Items in the collection

Ancestrylibrary.com (Accessed 22 February 2023):

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“El Centro Hispano / The Hispanic Center.” *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*
<https://indyencyclopedia.org/el-centro-hispano-the-hispanic-center/> Accessed 22 February 2023.

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<https://ulib.iupui.edu/digitalcollections/icd> Accessed 23 February 2023.

La Plaza. “History” <https://www.laplazaindy.org/history/> Accessed 22 February 2023.

Martinez-LeGrand, Nicole. “The Lost Barrio of Indianapolis.” Indiana Historical Society Blog, 13 March 2020 <https://indianahistory.org/blog/the-lost-barrio-of-indianapolis/>
Accessed 22 February 2023.

“Mexicano Club Elects Officers.” *The Indianapolis Star*, 9 June 1958, p. 10.

Obituary for Maria B. Balli Espinoza. *The Indianapolis Star*, 12 January 1992, p. 35.

Oral History interview with Connie Hamm, Ricky Espinoza, and Sylvia Clark, conducted by Nicole Martinez-LeGrand, of the Indiana Historical Society, on 15 November 2019.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of 29 digitized photographs of the Espinoza family, their El Nopal Mexican Market, and various activities, plus a digitized letter written in 1976 by Feliciano Espinoza to WFMS radio station in Indianapolis requesting a weekly hour of airtime for Mexican American programming and a digitized copy of Feliciano Espinoza's 1927 birth certificate. The photographs are from the 1950s–1970s. There is also an oral history interview conducted in 2019 of three of Feliciano and Maria Espinoza's children about their parents' legacy in Indianapolis.

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