



La Yarda

By Lourdes Kalusha-Aguirre

Originally aired July 2021

Hi! My name is Lourdes Kalusha-Aguirre and I am the project director for the La Yarda documentary. La Yarda was community of Mexican railroad workers and their families that formed in Lawrence in the early 1900s. Picture this: two rectangular housing structures across from one another, under black walnut trees. Railroad ties created the borders for flower gardens in front of each house. Each had different flowers, planted by the families as address markers. And the well in the middle served as the water source for this whole community.

The story I'm going to tell you today was told to me by Pedro Romero, who grew up at La Yarda.

Many of the families grew food in their own gardens, and Pedro remembers his dad's big tomato plant. He would always ask Pedro and his brother to go get water for it, and of course Pedro and his brother were little, and the buckets for water were big, and Pedro says the buckets were about half the size of them. So by the time they walked all the way to the pump and back, half the water they'd gotten had spilled out of the buckets.

The homes at La Yarda didn't have running water or electricity for a long time, and the residents experienced hardships ranging from discrimination to the flood that eventually wiped their homes away. Still, the Romeros we interviewed remembered their childhood fondly because of the deep sense of community. They would go to mass at St. John's church and have picnics together afterwards, and they still get together for events like Christmas and Father's Day. Maybe the most iconic place the families reunite in Lawrence is at the St. John's Mexican Fiesta.

The fiesta began as a fundraiser in 1980, organized by Mexican-American families in Lawrence, including some who had previously lived at La Yarda. Over the years it has grown into a larger event staffed by 300 volunteers. Each June, thousands of people come to hear live Mariachi music, see traditional Mexican dancing, and eat homemade tacos, burritos, tamales, and enchiladas. Proceeds from the fiesta support the Spanish language program at St. John's School and a scholarship fund for post-secondary education to Mexican youth in Lawrence. Though the fiesta is the big event, families volunteer to help with food prep, bringing them together many times during the month of June.

I got involved with this project because I realized that throughout all my education in Kansas public schools, I had never heard any history of Mexican-Americans in Kansas. In fact, Mexican-American families have lived in Kansas for generations, and communities like La Yarda popped up all over the route of the Sante Fe railway, from Topeka to Dodge City. With the documentary, I hope to present this history in an accessible way, so that both kids and adults can see a more diverse Kansas history that they can relate to.

This transcript of "La Yarda" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.