



Ft. Madison *¡Fiesta!* Oldest in Iowa

Think Iowa ancestry and most envision German, Danish, Dutch, and English. Maybe even French. And in general that compilation is accurate. So it's surprising to learn that the oldest festival in Iowa was organized 87 years ago by Mexican immigrants.

Mexican men made the trek to Fort Madison at the turn of the 20th century to work on the Santa Fe Railroad. Their families soon followed, taking up residence in boxcars provided by the railroad and becoming the village they called "El Cometa." In the early 1920s they asked, "Why don't we start celebrating?" explains Lucy Prado, a niece of one of the Fiesta founders.

Following a flood in the mid-1920s, the Mexican Fiesta moved to Avenue Q, where the annual celebration has been held most years since. (The tradition was suspended during World War II, when Mexican youth were serving in the military.) Many descendants of the Fiesta founders live in the area today. "They celebrated the independence of Mexico," says Prado. "Now people come for the food and the music." — C.B.

This year's Mexican Fiesta in Fort Madison is scheduled for September 17-19. For information, visit www.fortmadison.com/pages/news.htm.