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## Spanish definitely spoken here: State's Hispanics gain in numbers, clout

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by [Florangela Davila](#)  
Seattle Times staff reporter



YAKIMA - A local woman named Esmeralda has seen her future, and it involves a man called Roberto.



So with love on the brain, she does what any modern woman would do: She calls her local radio station and requests a love song.



HARLEY SOLTES / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Carlos Torres carries a sack of flour past a boom box tuned to Spanish station Radio Zorro at La Petunia bakery in Yakima.

Matchmaking duties, in this case, fall on the shoulders of Luís Ezequial Muñoz, also known as "El Cheque," who at the moment is cooing into his mike: *"Hola! ¿Quién me llama?"*

The 23-year-old Mexican transplant and former Los Angeleno has arrived in the state's agricultural heartland, inspired by another sort of bounty: Hispanic radio listeners.

Here in the Yakima Valley and the rest of Eastern Washington, among the hops and apples and wine grapes, Spanish-language radio is the latest cash crop.

There are now at least 11 such stations, broadcasting from the valley, Walla Walla, Wenatchee and northern Oregon, said Mark Allen, president and chief executive of the Washington State Association of Broadcasters.

"Ten, fifteen years ago, there was very little Spanish-

language programming," said Allen.

By all accounts, especially the 2000 census, the airwaves are ripe for the Spanish-language surge.

Call it the Latinization of the nation, if you will. The Hispanic population has climbed by 58 percent since 1990; at 35 million, it is larger than the population of Canada.

In Washington, the Hispanic population doubled in the last decade and now numbers 441,509, about 7.5 percent of the population. Those numbers will keep rising: Hispanics, by far, are the youngest of the state's racial or ethnic groups, with 40 percent under 18.

In Adams and Franklin counties in Eastern Washington, nearly half the population is Hispanic. More than 35 percent of Yakima County is Hispanic.

### **More Central Americans**

The state's Hispanic population continues to be made up largely of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. But community leaders and social-service workers have noticed more and more Central Americans: Guatemalans in Shelton, for example; Salvadorans in Aberdeen.

There also are more indigenous people from Mexico, who speak neither Spanish nor English but their native Indian dialect.

The number of Hispanic-owned companies in Washington grew 64 percent from 1992 to 1997, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Hispanic businesses in 1997 employed 18,830 people, compared with 8,065 five years earlier.

"There's a maturation of the Latino community," said Onofre Contreras, executive director of the state Commission on Hispanic Affairs. "It's the same process you see that European immigrants went through. They start off at the bottom, at entry-level jobs. Then the working class becomes a business class and then a stable middle class.

"Having grown up in California, I see some of the same parallels happening here. It's nothing that hasn't occurred in other places. It's just that it's Washington's time."

If the surge in population surprises some, broadcast companies have realized the market potential for some time here in sagebrush and orchard country.

All of the Spanish-language stations with the exception of one, Radio Cadena, were once Anglo stations that switched formats and languages.

"It's basic numbers. When you look at a market like Yakima, which is 35 percent Hispanic, you know there's a market that needs to be served," said Bob Berry, general manager for Butterfield Broadcasting in Yakima, which operates five stations in Eastern Washington and plans to start a sixth by mid-April.

Berry used to run a talk-radio and country-music station in Grant County. It was Faith Hill before Las Tucanes de Tijuana, one of his favorite music groups now.

When his company, Mirage Communications, merged with Butterfield in September, Berry began overseeing Zorro Broadcasting, which plays contemporary music known as regional Mexican: some norteño, some tejano, some grupos, some banda.

Zorro caters to listeners between 18 and 49 years old. In its promotional materials, it estimates the disposable income for Hispanics in the Yakima and Tri-Cities areas - not including an estimated 100,000 migrant workers in any given year - is \$554 million.

Granger's Radio Cadena or KDNA, in its 22nd year, is the only full-time Spanish-language public radio station in the United States. Billing itself as a news and educational resource for a vast farmworkers community, it broadcasts programs that touch on everything from labor rights to pesticide safety.

Because its listeners may be illiterate or semi-literate, the station has also produced *radionovelas*, or dramas, encouraging healthier lifestyles, warning of the consequences of unsafe sex or alcohol abuse.

In the early 1980s, KSVR Radio, broadcasting from Mount Vernon's Skagit Valley College, noticed a flurry of listener response whenever its student disc jockeys would speak Spanish.

The story was that older, non-English-speaking residents would leave their radios on 24 hours a day, hoping to hear something they could understand, said Rip Robbins, the station's general manager.

What used to be a part-time college radio station is now a

full-time station with half of its programming in Spanish.

"Our radio is on in virtually every business in this valley, because the people behind the scenes are Hispanic," said Robbins.

"People setting up in restaurants have us on. At the farms. In the warehouses and packing plants. I know, because our phones ring off the hook with people calling in for dedications."

At the Zorro studio in Yakima, one mile from downtown, past the Greenway Bingo Hall, Arturo from Pasco is on the line. He wants something for his wife, and Carlos from Yakima wants something for Cristina.

"A lot of people who call us work *en el campo*," said DJ Martin "El Primo" Ortiz. "We've heard stories about people listening on their Walkmans, calling from the fields on their cell phones.

"It's part of our nostalgia, this music. We are far away from our homeland. Our Mexico."

Whistling while you work is one thing but, if you can, why not groove to Juan Gabriel instead?

So at La Petunia bakery, the *panaderos*, arriving in the wee hours to make *conchas*, *campechana*, *teleras* and other pastries, flick on a flour-soaked Panasonic and listen to Julio Preciado on Radio Zorro.

### **Little bit of Mexico**

At La Doncella, a house turned hair salon with a map of Mexico on one wall and an Aztec calendar on another, stylist Selena Balentínez switches off a *telenovela* at her customer's request and turns on the radio for a noontime show featuring *música romántica*.

"There's a saying, 'To remember is to live,' " said Balentínez, a student at Yakima Valley College who is originally from the Mexican state of Michoacán.

"Sometimes I'll hear a song, and I remember it was, say, a song my sister used to listen to. It transports you to another time. It reminds me of my father, say, or el rancho."

In the broadcast booth, DJ El Cheque, on the air from 3 to 7 p.m weekdays, bellows: "*Gracias, Washington! Gracias,*

*Oregon! Llámame!"*

The phones ring.

It's Teresita from Milton.

*"Que rico!"*

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*Times data-base specialist Justin Mayo contributed to this report.*

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