

1 The Making of Arnhem, the “Friendly City”

It was the best of times—period. When Stan Bronowski [age sixty-seven] talks about life in Arnhem before World War II, he tells no *Tale of Two Cities*. . . . “My father never stopped working in the mills . . . He never got a pension . . . Needs were simple. . . . Everybody was equal. No one was really better than anyone else . . .” With the war came the changes. Stan’s voice changed when he talked about the war. The smile left his face After the war, the mills started leaving along with the people. . . . “The big difference today is [our] kids are all moving away. Before everyone wanted to stay here. . . . [Now] there’s nothing here.” —“Outlook ’85: Our Past, Present, Future,” supplement to *Arnhem Record*¹

Arnhem² traces its beginnings to the late 1700s, when it first emerged as a small, somewhat remote upstate New York village. Native Americans living in the region at that time were rapidly displaced by European immigrants and their descendants, eventually including English, Dutch, German, Irish, and Jewish settlers. In the decades following the Civil War regional industries began to prosper; Arnhem, with its seemingly inexhaustible supply of water power and access to a major river, was on its way to becoming the proverbial boom town. The industrialization then transforming the nation likewise transformed Arnhem. An 1870 business directory sang the city’s praises, pointing to the production of more than \$500,000 worth of coffins annu-

ally, four thousand pounds of soap per week, and twenty thousand clothes wringers per year, plus the use of forty thousand bushels of grain by the local malt house. Large numbers of southern and eastern Europeans, particularly Italians, Poles, and Lithuanians, had been drawn to the city to work in its carpet, garment, button, and broom factories. The 1870 population of ninety-five hundred climbed to thirty-two thousand by 1910. Representatives of one trade organization optimistically opened in 1905 that "the natural advantages for manufacturing purposes are practically inexhaustible. Arnhem possesses all the elements for the growth of a great and prosperous city. Within 20 years it ought to have a population of 50,000."

While Arnhem's population never hit that projected peak (topping out at 35,000 in the 1930s), projections of the city's economic future did appear to be accurate. In its heyday, local lore maintains, Arnhem was home to more than thirty millionaires, allegedly the highest per capita rate in the country. A local clergyman, now aged ninety-seven, recalls the era:

The '20s and '30s were a time of hectic prosperity. We were drunk with prosperity. The mills in the city and in Harman were flourishing. There were a lot of millionaires and there was bathroom gin. Money was plentiful. We were just getting over World War I and everyone went on a spree. (*Arnhem Record*, "Outlook '85")

Local annals, however, also recount the day-to-day struggles that immigrants faced, laboring for one dollar a day and only gradually pushing their pay average to nine dollars a week with a twelve-hour work day. Attempts by the Knights of Labor to unionize the mill hands in 1896 following a pay cut failed when mill owners united and closed their plants,

refusing to negotiate for eight months. Silk mill workers struck for ten months in 1920, and carpet company weavers struck for an equivalent period in 1921. Not until the late 1930s were the city's textile workers unionized, under the auspices of the National Labor Relations Act passed by Congress in 1935.

Older community members today can reel off the names of the ethnic neighborhoods that dominated the city landscape in their youth: Little Italy, "Polack" Hill, Kearney Hill, Money Hill (the wealthy area, home to long-settled, successful residents), Pancake Hill, and Dutch Hill among them. These citizens remember their parents and grandparents continuing to speak their native languages at home and in the ethnic clubs and churches that proliferated throughout the city. They also recall the days when ethnic group boundaries were more rigidly maintained—when marrying outside one's ethnic group, and particularly one's religion, was frowned on; youth hung out in ethnic cliques that had their bases in the ethnic neighborhoods and local elementary schools; and parents admonished children of marrying age to "stick with your own kind." Not until after World War II did interethnic and interreligious marriages become more acceptable for these descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants. Despite significant intermarriage, today almost two-thirds of Arnhem's Euro-American population still identifies ethnically as all or part Italian, Polish, or Lithuanian.

It was also after World War II that the beginnings of industrial flight and evidence of its long-term impact first appeared. As in other northeastern cities built around manufacturing, Arnhem's industrial base began eroding. Employers were moving to the South, where, without strong unions, labor costs were significantly lower. Arnhem's largest mill

closed its doors in 1955, and a media story soon characterized the city as "New York's latest distress area." By 1968 carpet looms across Arnhem had been shut down and sold off; knitting mills stood abandoned; and the broom-making industry, with the advent of vacuum cleaners, had become little more than a relic. The vacant shells of the factories that once employed thousands of workers today stand as silent reminders to residents of those earlier, more prosperous times, and a profound sense of a lost golden era is apparent in the reminiscences of older community members. One local journalist captured their sentiments well in a feature story on the town's history that included the story of Stan Bronowski, a prominent Arnhem senior citizen and long-time restaurateur:

Like stories heard from most natives of Arnhem his age, the story starts on a boat across an ocean in a place where life just wasn't good enough. . . . His tale is about one city: A place filled with good people, plenty of action, and work for anyone who wanted it. He talks about a homogeneous place—most had the same, did the same, lived the same and wanted the same. The thread that tied the "good place" together was the mills

When the owners of those mills packed up and headed south, employers offering lower wages, uncertain employment, and few benefits moved in to fill the void. Some initially recruited workers for this burgeoning secondary labor market; in other cases people migrated to the area on their own in search of work. Arnhem's present-day Puerto Rican and Costa Rican populations gained a foothold during this era. Puerto Ricans began making their way north as early as the late 1940s and the 1950s in the wake of Operation Bootstrap, the U.S. government program that industrialized the island and, in the process, displaced agricultural workers. Costa Rican men, according to local lore, were drawn to the community in the early 1960s for factory work and to play

for the city's soccer team,³ recruited by a priest who had worked in Costa Rica. These earliest migrants in turn established the family networks that helped pave the way for later (im)migrants.⁴

Media coverage and discussions with community members suggest that this emerging Latino community, residentially concentrated in the city's East End, was merely "tolerated" during the early decades of its existence. It also appears that community members were largely excluded from many traditional avenues for upward mobility, including access to better jobs.⁵ With the construction in the 1970s of the Arnhem Mall—what one Latino leader refers to as the "Arnhem Wall"—the Latino population was further isolated from the Euro-American population. Once, the town's parades, community events, and shopping district had run the entire length of the main street, incorporating the East End, and people had moved freely across ethnic neighborhood borders. Now the mall blocked the free flow of traffic from one neighborhood to another.

Arnhem's relatively small Latino community increased rapidly in the 1980s, echoing the national trend, and today a growing number of Latinos live scattered throughout the city. Between 1980 and 1990 the city's Latino population grew by 70 percent, and by 1990 school records counted Latinos as 17 percent of the total student population. The 1990 census report put Latinos at 12 percent of the city's population, but many community members estimate their numbers to be much greater.⁶ Puerto Ricans today make up 75 percent of the city's Latino population and Costa Ricans, the second-largest group, 12 percent. Dominicans represent 6 percent; Peruvians 3 percent; and Mexicans, Cubans, Argentinians, and Colombians the remaining 4 percent. Peruvians, Colombians, and Argentinians, unlike the overwhelming majority

of working-class and poverty-class Puerto Ricans concentrated in the city projects and the East End, live scattered across the city in middle-class neighborhoods. These differing housing patterns suggest that Peruvians, Colombians, and Argentinians in Arnhem are representative of the more middle-class nature of South American immigration to the United States.

There are hierarchies within hierarchies in Arnhem. The city's Costa Ricans are often contrasted favorably with Puerto Ricans: the former are typically portrayed as hard-working, family-oriented, law-abiding citizens who keep up their homes and are concerned about their children's education. Latinos who are not Puerto Rican often resent being taken for Puerto Ricans because the latter have such low status in the community.⁷

The perception that Puerto Ricans are looked down on not only by whites but also by other Latinos was one voiced by many I spoke with. A conversation I had with two young women and their friends and family who wandered through their kitchen while we were talking one afternoon points to their awareness of the stigmatization of Puerto Ricans in the community. Lidia Perez, who moved from New York City twelve years ago, rents the downstairs half of a house on the East End; her cousin Doris lives upstairs. Their two-family wooden-sided house, separated from its neighbors by driveways on each side, looks much like all the other houses that line the streets of the older neighborhoods in Arnhem, popular now, as when they were built, for their potential to easily accommodate extended families.

What started out as a formal interview soon evolved into an invitation to spend the afternoon with Lidia and her friends and family. Adults and children, smiling shyly at me when introduced by their mothers, wandered in and out of

the kitchen where several women were putting together the makings of a stew for dinner. The conversation ranged from how Lidia's family came to settle in Arnhem and their frustrations with the schools to what aspects of their Puerto Rican heritage their children were likely to retain as second-generation "mainlanders." Lidia worries that her children don't speak Spanish to her anymore; she wants them to be proud of their Puerto Rican heritage. She is acutely aware that Puerto Ricans are often disparaged not only by whites but also by other Latinos, as is her close friend Marta Gomez:

Lidia Perez: That Costa Rican lady [married to a Puerto Rican] told me when her kids go to school [and] people ask them what they are, they [should] say, "I'm Costa Rican," because the Puerto Ricans are troublemakers.

Marta Gomez: Like I said, Costa Ricans and the Dominicans think that they're better than anybody else. I'm not saying all of them, but I think that a majority of them.

Like Lidia, an increasing number of the city's growing Puerto Rican population are transplants from metropolitan areas in the northeast seeking escape from the crime and violence of inner-city neighborhoods. Today more than 50 percent of Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States live outside New York City (Glasser 1995). They represent a growing trend among transplanted Puerto Ricans of fleeing big-city problems for the relative security of smaller cities (Glasser 1995; Stains 1994), and the reception they receive from "old-timers" in Arnhem is strikingly similar to the responses they encounter in other northeastern cities such as "Steel Town" (Soto 1997) and Allentown, Pennsylvania (Stains 1994).

Other Puerto Rican parents I interviewed had also moved upstate from the New York City area in the 1980s af-

ter hearing about Arnhem from relatives and friends already living there. Luz Ortiz, a young mother in her early thirties who works the night shift in a local factory, is typical of these migrants. Her parents came from the island to New York City in the 1950s and raised her and her five siblings in neighborhoods that were growing increasingly dangerous. Luz and her sister, Ana Flores, traced for me the story of their family's migration upstate, a resettlement that eventually came to include their parents and all of their siblings' families.

Ellen: And did everybody come basically for the same kinds of reasons?

Luz: Yes.

Ana: For better education for our children, better atmosphere.

Luz: Better atmosphere, more or less.

Ana: We feel that here they have a better chance of progressing.

Luz: They have better values here, not so much drugs. Where I lived in a building [in New York City], I lived in a good place and the rent was going up too high and I had to leave. Then I went to this building. . . . They put the door there every two weeks, metal doors, and they come and they steal the doors. They steal the lightbulbs.

Ana: We had junkies outside . . . people running up and down, and people on crack . . . and my kids were coming out of school, they had to be walking through people that were sitting on the stoops and shooting up. And there were shootings in the hallway during the night. You had to be careful before you walked out your door, make sure you didn't get shot. So it was horrible. There was no heat, no hot water sometimes in the winter.

While senior citizens in Arnhem may complain about the deteriorating quality of life in the city, for Puerto Ricans like Luz and Ana Arnhem is a reprieve from the struggles that confronted them in larger metropolitan areas. Luz chuckles when telling of her first encounter with Arnhem's "notorious" East End:

Oh yes, when I came here, people said, "Oh, the East End is so bad." I drove on the East End a million times, and I told my sister, "where is this East End that people talk about?" It didn't occur to me to look at signs. I knew how to go from my sister's house to my father's store, and to the mall, that's all I needed. Never looking at where was East Broad. [My sister] said, "You *are* [living] on East Broad!" Where's all these—I expected junkies and fights and bums and drugs, and it was so quiet. I mean, these people got to go to New York City to see what bad is.

While such migrations from troubled urban areas have fueled a growing Latino population in Arnhem, the city's overall numbers continue to decline. Arnhem's population, peaking at almost 35,000 residents in 1930 and still at over 32,000 as late as 1950, today stands at 21,000. Many younger members of the Euro-American workforce have left the community in search of better employment opportunities. Senior citizens, ages fifty-five and older, now represent more than over 30 percent of the population; 47 percent of all households in Arnhem include at least one person over age sixty.

The 1990 census statistics suggest important differences between the Euro-American and the Latino communities.⁸ One third of Arnhem's Latinos were born in Puerto Rico. Almost 80 percent of the Latino population speaks Spanish in the home; 81 percent of the Spanish speakers also report that they speak English "very well" or "well." Twenty-five percent of Latino respondents did not go beyond grade eight

in school; another 27 percent did not finish high school. Only 4 percent hold a college degree.

The percentage of whites who did not complete high school is also high (34 percent versus 52 percent for Latinos). Given the large numbers of senior citizens and the fact that the majority of the pre-World War II generation did not graduate (Meier 1992), however, it is likely many of those whites who did not complete school are members of the senior citizen population. Twelve percent of whites, meanwhile, have completed a college education.

Economically the Latino population also lags far behind its Euro-American counterparts. The unemployment rate for Latino adults during the time of the community debate in 1991 and 1992 was estimated at 22 percent; 40 percent live in substandard housing and only 2 percent own their own homes.⁹ Twelve percent of whites were living below the poverty level, compared to 34 percent of Latinos. Per capita income for whites was \$12,228; for Latinos it was \$7,427.¹⁰ Taken as a group, Latinos are "newer," poorer, and have less formal education than local whites.

Today there is considerable friction between the Arnhem's elderly Euro-Americans and the more recently arrived Latino population, and it is these seniors who are most vocal in their criticism of the Latino community and the costs of educating a new generation of Americans. It is not uncommon, particularly among senior citizens, to hear complaints about the city being "overrun" and "destroyed" by Latinos. Talk of "all the violence in the schools" and how "those people" don't take care of their homes and children is common. Letters to the editor and calls to local talk show hosts frequently claim that Latinos expect handouts and flock to the city because it allegedly has the most generous welfare payments in the state. John Roche, a city resident

in his late fifties who teaches in the junior high school, summarized the grievances in an interview:

They resent them. . . . You can't blame them. You pick up the paper every day, and these people are constantly in trouble with the law. . . . They are also, when you look at the budget, the county budget is gonna show you that they use up the vast majority of the welfare budgeting, they get welfare in this county, a great deal of it is paid out to the Puerto Ricans, and, see people, they resent that. I've often felt myself, why do they hate them so much, but it doesn't take you too long. . . . They don't try to better themselves, they go on welfare, it's costing us a fortune to keep them here, they are always in some kind of trouble, and that's all they do is cause a problem, even in our educational system, you know, even in school.

Local Latinos are well aware of such sentiments, and many privately discuss how they bitterly resent being looked down on and stereotyped by whites:

Luz Ortiz: [Mario] came home and he was mad. He says "Mom, I went in there and I was just looking around. I wasn't doing anything." [and] she followed him all over the store. And this happens in a lot of places. . . . It still frustrates Mario when he goes into places and he says, "Well, they watch me." "Well, honey, that's a fact of life and we have to learn to live with it, because that's the way people are."

Blanca del Valle: You know by the way they talk to you, and the way they talk down to you, that they are prejudiced.

Many local Euro-Americans also bitterly complain about Latinos using Spanish in public. Spanish speakers in public places may encounter overt hostility, and are frequently accused of being too lazy to learn English or of being unwilling to become "American." Hostility toward accommodating Spanish speakers surfaces in the newspaper, in public meetings, and in informal conversations. For instance, when the

local newspaper printed a public notice in both English and Spanish of the danger of drinking polluted tap water, many angry calls and letters to the editor bristled with resentment:

The next time you feel the need to "serve the community" by printing an article in another language, be sure to serve all of Arnhem's residents, and print your story in Polish and Italian—two nationalities that are the cornerstones of this city.
(Letter to the editor, *Arnhem Record*, April 29, 1953)

This, then, is the local context in which the fierce struggles around multiculturalism and bilingualism arose in Arnhem. Understanding how those "two nationalities," Poles and Italians, became the "cornerstones" of cities like Arnhem while Puerto Ricans as a group remain relegated to the lower rungs of the social class ladder is essential to making sense of such conflicts. It is to this matter that we now turn.