

History

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Socorro Bergeron an example of city's rich, ethnic heritage

Willimantic has a rich, diverse, ethnic heritage. The railroads and cotton mills brought the Irish to the borough in the 1840s, followed by the French-Canadians in the 1860s. From the 1890s up until World War I, Polish, Italian and Jewish immigrants arrived in the growing city. During the late 1940s, a variety of central and eastern European "displaced persons" came to work at the American Thread Co. and Electro-Motive Manufacturing Co. Puerto Ricans arrived in the region during the late 1950s and early 1960s, to work in agriculture and chicken processing.

Socorro (Rviz) Bergeron was probably one of the first Puerto Ricans to settle in Willimantic. She was born in San Juan in 1938. Her father was a long-shoreman and her mother worked as a domestic, and did needlework in the Convent of St. Augustine. When Socorro's eldest brother Julio graduated high school in 1942, he left the island to find work in New York City. Shortly afterwards Julio joined the U.S. Merchant Marine, and survived many dangerous Atlantic convoy crossings during World War II. Julio eventually arranged for his mother, his brother Joe and his sister Socorro to join him in



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New York City. The family lived on Amsterdam Avenue, about three blocks from City College. Socorro recalls being fascinated by all the different languages she heard in New York, such as Greek, German, Italian and Irish-English.

Shortly after World War II, Julio left New York to attend the Coast Guard Academy in New London. He subsequently met a Willimantic girl, married her, and suggested to his family that they should settle in Willimantic. Socorro's mother was becoming nervous about living in New York City, and in 1948 she decided to move her family to eastern Connecticut.

Willimantic was so quiet in comparison. Ten-year-old Socorro couldn't understand why the streets emptied after 5:30 p.m.! In New York everyone "hung out on the stoop in the evening. The family lived at 55 Broad St. across from the "Scratchhouse" cinema better

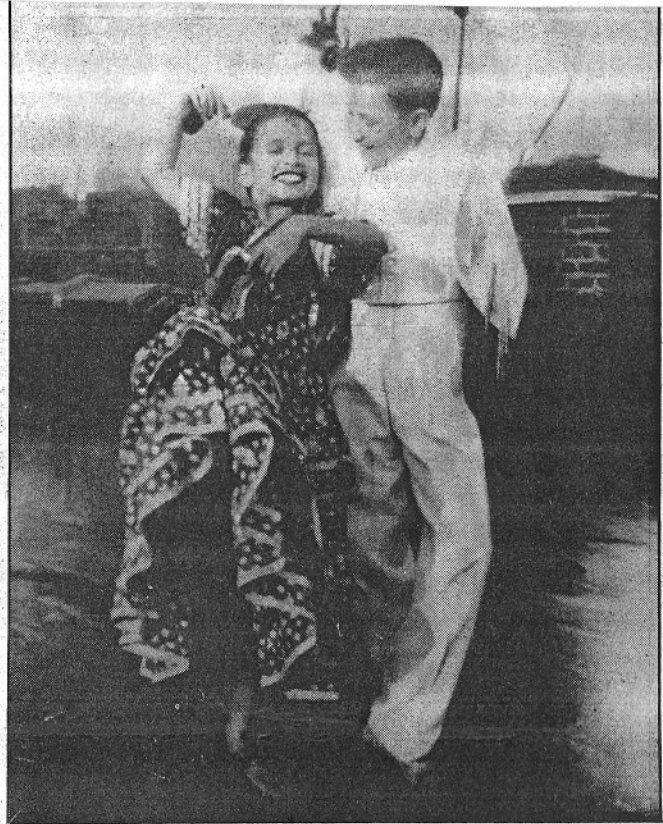
known as the Strand Theater.

Socorro's mother worked for Electro-Motive on South Park Street, testing capacitors, and Socorro attended the Natchaug School.

Socorro and her other brother Joe had become accomplished Spanish flamenco dancers in New York. Their mother made their costumes, and they received professional training from Lola Brobo, a well-known Spanish-born, New York City-based flamenco dancer. The dancing lessons continued in Willimantic at Evelyn McFarlane's dancing school, and Socorro and Joe gained a deal of fame when they danced at Carnegie Hall in New York City and appeared on several CBS children's shows.

Socorro and Joe turned professional in 1950, after appearing at Russell Barrett's talent shows at the Capitol Cinema. They danced flamenco, the rumba, samba and tango locally at the Rock Garden and with Bob Gray and his band at the Shell Chateau.

Socorro met Antonio "Tony" Bergeron at school, and the couple were married in 1956. Tony was in the Air Force, and was posted to Omaha, Neb. The couple returned to Willi-



Flamenco dancers Socorro and Joe Rviz, pictured in New York City during the late 1940s, shortly before their arrival in Willimantic.

matic in 1960. Tony Bergeron was born on Hope Street, Willimantic in 1938. His uncle, Florimond J. Bergeron (1898-1964), was a long-serving Democratic mayor of Willimantic, occupying six terms in the post between 1949 and 1961. Socorro worked at Elec-

tro-Motive, and Tony worked for American Thread and Hamilton Standard.

Socorro and Tony are now retired, and despite living just over the border in Mansfield, they are an highly representative example of Willimantic's rich, ethnic heritage.