STANLEY VALADEZ: A MEXICAN-AMERICAN PIONEER IN PITTSBURGH

By Ron Schuler

The earliest Hispanic lawyer in Pittsburgh was admitted to the bar in 1958.

While Allegheny County can now boast that "Hispanic/Latino" is one of the fastest growing segments of its population, with an estimated 30,000 residents as of 2021, in 1958, there were fewer than 3,800 Hispanic residents in Allegheny County. The small number of Hispanic Americans in Pittsburgh when Stanley Valadez went to law school, passed the bar, and entered practice in Allegheny County, makes his achievement all the more notable and all themore impressive.

He was born Estanislao Valadez to Miguel "Michael" Valadez and Maria Luz "Lucy" Ramirez in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on December 19, 1924, the eldest son among eight of ten children surviving infancy. The family arrived in Johnstown by way of Texas from León, Guanajuato, Mexico, just before Valadez was born. Stanley's family nicknamed him "Tanilo"; but a teacher anglicized his name as "Stanley," and it stuck with him.

One of the largest employers in Johnstown at that time was Bethlehem Steel. Among Bethlehem Steel's labor force were a large number of African Americans, who were hired during the "Great Migration" as scab workers during the 1919 Steel Strike. In a further effort to keep wages low, Bethlehem began to recruit "trainloads" of Mexican workers in cattle cars from the Southwest to join the unskilled workforce in Johnstown. Stanley's parents had been picking cotton in Texas, and Michael was among the wave of Mexicans who came to Johnstown and joined Bethlehem at that time, working as a coke loader at the Cambria Works.

In the summer of 1923, racial and ethnic tensions were running high throughout Western Pennsylvania. On August 26th, the national imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan attempted to lead a march through Carnegie as a show of force against recently arrived African Americans and "Catholics" (a code word for Irish and Southern and Central Europeans as well as Hispanics). The march erupted into a riot in which one Klan member was killed and several townspeople and Klan members were wounded. The ink had not dried on those headlines when on August 30 a deadly gun battle broke out on the streets of Johnstown between Black youths and policemen. Amid threats by the local Klan to burn down Rosedale, a section of the city where both Blacks and

Mexicans lived, Johnstown's erratic mayor, Joseph Cauffell, weighed in on the side of white supremacists, demanding that African Americans should "pack up [their] belongings and get out," and insisting that the city should ban the importation of Black and Mexican laborers.

Bethlehem Steel, while still paying poverty-line wages, stood by the Black and Mexican workers, but many of their families did not feel comfortable staying in Johnstown. During this volatile period, Michael and Lucy Valadez took the family to León for an extended visit. Before the Mexican Revolution caused them to move to the U.S., the Valadez family had a successful retail business in León, but in post-Revolutionary Mexico, the Valadezes no longer had many opportunities available to them there. Meanwhile, back in Johnstown, while the prejudices did not subside, the immediate threat of violence seemed to dissipate as Mayor Caufell was voted out and the Klan's influence waned. Eventually, the Valadezes returned to Rosedale Avenue and opened a mom-and-pop store which Lucy ran while Michael returned to the steel mills.

By the mid-1940s, Mexican families had become a small but visible group within Johnstown's population. While in high school, Stanley started a basketball team with his brothers, playing other club teams in white T-shirts instead of basketball silks. His daughter, Ruth Valadez, recalls that Stanley did not have much use for social interaction, but paradoxically he had a quick wit, as well as the personality and instincts of a promoter. Soon, Stanley's exploits on the basketball court, despite the fact that he was only five-foot-two inches tall, began to show up in the local newspapers. "He was a well-known character in Johnstown," said his widow, Leah Cohen Valadez, where everyone called him by his nickname, "Smooth."

Stanley had no fixed ambition as he finished high school and no idea that he could enter a profession—although he thought about becoming a teacher. During high school, Stanley had worked at the steel mill and the Pennsylvania Railroad in Johnstown. His mother told him that he needed to start providing as the eldest son following his father's death in 1942. "I understand lawyers make money," she said. Shortly after graduation, Stanley enlisted in the Army. Ultimately ascending to Sergeant, Stanley gained combat experience with a coastal artillery anti-aircraft unit in the European Theater until 1945, when he was wounded and sent home—with an injured hand and a Purple Heart medal. Back home, he began volunteering with AMVETS, a veterans' advocacy group. He served as an AMVETS Service Officer for Western Pennsylvania and later became the State Public Relations Director for the group.

In January 1954, Valadez served as a National Service Officer for AMVETS when he was invited to speak to a Jewish War Veterans (JWV) post in Oakland. There he met Leah Cohen, who was working as secretary to the director of the JWV. He approached the director, who was selling raffle tickets at the event, and told him that he would buy all the tickets from him if he would get Leah to go out on a date with him. Stanley and Leah married the following year, but not without facing some bitter social resistance in Pittsburgh, a melting pot city whose immigrant populations were unfamiliar with Mexican Americans.

During the War and while working with AMVETS, Stanley realized that he had a talent for writing and public speaking, something that had never occurred to him while he was in high school, and he pursued his B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh. He also began his political involvement during that time, founding a Pennsylvania chapter of the League of United Latin-American Citizens (LULAC), the largest and oldest Hispanic civil rights organization in the U.S. After finishing his degree at Pitt, he attended law school at Duquesne University, where he is believed to have been the first Mexican-American admitted and the first to graduate. Finally, at the age of 34, he entered the bar. Continuing his political involvement, Governor Joseph Barr named Valadez as chairman of the Latin American Division of the Pennsylvania Democratic State Committee.

Working as a sole practitioner in the Hill District, Valadez soon discovered how difficult it would be to sustain a practice in the city. During the early 20th century, the first African American and Italian lawyers in Pittsburgh entered the bar and found a ready-made clientele from among the previously underrepresented members of their communities. For Stanley Valadez, there was no large community of Hispanics who might have naturally gravitated toward his services, and employers had no prior history with Mexican American clerks that would make him an obvious fit for a behind-the-scenes desk job.

He proceeded gamely, though, taking whatever walked through the door, and supplementing his practice with an ongoing involvement in progressive politics, Hispanic civil rights causes, and community matters, as well as continuing to volunteer with AMVETS. In 1960, he was actively involved with the Viva Kennedy Club, established after John F. Kennedy was nominated for president by the Democrats, and served as Pittsburgh's Honorary Consul of Mexico. In 1961, Valadez was named Pennsylvania chairman of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Associations (PASSO). PASSO, which was an outgrowth of the Viva Kennedy movement, worked to elect Hispanics to political office and supported agricultural union campaigns before being absorbed by Raza Unida in the late 1960s. Meanwhile,

Valadez also led his extended family on tourist trips to Mexico, bringing back cartons of shoes and clothes to give to Mexican immigrants in the Pittsburgh area.

Eventually, Valadez's notoriety as a civil rights campaigner gave him the credibility to be invited to become the Pittsburgh representative of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. There he worked to eliminate housing discrimination in Wilkinsburg and joined with the National Organization for Women to eliminate job discrimination based on gender as promoted in the classified ads of the Pittsburgh Press—a case that was particularly important to him, he said, because he and Leah had three daughters. During a court argument in the Press case, Valadez's opposing counsel asked him if he would concede that some jobs are gender-specific. "Yes," said Valadez, "Nurse-maid and sperm donor." He was ultimately a member of the team that won the case on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court and was sponsored for admission to the Court by the leader of the Senate Republicans, Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania. The fact that Senator Scott would support Valadez, despite their political differences, indicates Valadez's excellent professional reputation, across the state and on both sides of the partisan aisle.

Valadez also represented the United Farmworkers in Pennsylvania and hosted its acclaimed leader Cesar Chavez in Pittsburgh. Later, Valadez was appointed to the Pennsylvania Consumer Protection Bureau, and as special assistant to the Pennsylvania attorney general for consumer affairs. In all of these roles, Valadez was visible as a lone Mexican-American from Pittsburgh, speaking at civil and consumer rights events in Pittsburgh and around Pennsylvania.

It was a lot of effort for not much reward. In 1971, Valadez decided to leave Pittsburgh, moving his family to the Washington, DC area. There, he went to work at the General Services Administration before serving as an administrative law judge for a time, later returning to private practice as an immigration lawyer. He also founded the Hispanic Organization of Professionals and Executives, a group that might have been inconceivable almost anywhere in the United States when he first attended law school in the 1950s. He died following a stroke at the age of 69 in Silver Spring, Maryland on March 10, 1994.

The story of Valadez's Pittsburgh career does not have a happy ending. When he left Pittsburgh in 1971, little progress had been made in Pittsburgh in advancing the Hispanic/Latino community. Now, however, we can mark a number of milestones: a growing Latino community in Pittsburgh, along with the establishment of a number of Latino-owned businesses; a wave of Latino social support and community organizations, such as Casa San Jose, Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corporation, Salud Para Niños, and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for Western Pennsylvania; and many successful Hispanic attorneys in Pittsburgh who have achieved leadership positions. Closer to home, Stanley's grandson, Elias Garcia, now enters the bar after attending law school at UC Berkeley. It is unfortunate that Stanley Valadez did not live to see these changes, however modest. It is said that at the end of his career, Valadez felt that he never achieved what he expected; but we celebrate the career of Stanley Valadez—for leading the way for the Pittsburgh Latino attorneys who have followed him.

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