

La Curación en el Norte

(“The Cure” in the North)

Latin Americans in Saranac Lake

BY AMY CATANIA

In the summer of 1936, Mercedes Andino left her comfortable life as a government clerk in Cuba and traveled 1,500 miles north to Saranac Lake in upstate New York. But it was not for a vacation. Like many wealthy Latin Americans who had been coming to the heart of the Adirondack Mountains since the turn of the century, Mercedes made the long, grueling trip in search of a cure for her tuberculosis.

One man’s experience in the North Country in the 1870s had made Saranac Lake world-famous among physicians and wealthy TB patients. In 1873, Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau arrived in the Adirondacks to die—or so he thought. But the clean mountain air, the pristine climate, and plenty of hearty food sent his tuberculosis into retreat, and Dr. Trudeau soon settled in Saranac Lake, determined to share his “cure” with other health seekers. As news of the long-term, fresh-air treatment spread, consumptives from all over the world began coming to Saranac Lake. The village quickly grew to meet their needs—and became rich, famous, and international in the bargain.

Like the thousands of patients from all over Latin America who came for “the cure” and then returned home, Mercedes Andino left behind few traces of her activities. But by researching health records and old newspaper

and magazine articles, and by recording local residents’ memories in oral histories and interviews, a picture gradually emerges of cultural and daily life for these “relocated” Latinos in the little village in New York’s last wilderness.

Home Away from the Homeland

By 1900, tuberculosis was a tremendous health problem in Latin America, even among the wealthy, spreading rapidly in regions with underdeveloped sanitation and few public health infrastructures. Many Latin American doctors visited Saranac Lake to study the latest medical procedures at the Trudeau Sanatorium or to cure their own cases of TB, a common hazard of the job. Although nearly two-thirds of Saranac Lake’s Latino patients came from Puerto Rico or Cuba, health records show that the remainder came from virtually every country in the Americas. TB was famous for striking people in





the prime of their lives, and the Latino patients were mostly young adults in their twenties and thirties. Some came alone; others traveled with family members, friends, or entire households with servants. While the peak years for Latinos were the mid-1930s, Saranac Lake hosted a steady population of Spanish-speaking patients through the entire first half of the twentieth century.

In 1936, Mercedes Andino's personal physician in Cuba probably referred her to the village based on personal knowledge of the town and its facilities, and most likely arranged for her to "cure" at the only Spanish-speaking "cure cottage" in town, 80 Park Avenue, run by Alfredo and Alicia Gonzalez. Thanks to them, over the next five years Mercedes would not only recuperate from TB; she would also learn English, make friends with local residents and other patients, and participate in community life.

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The dashing and gregarious Alfredo no doubt met Mercedes in person at the train station. Once she was registered by local health officials, Mercedes settled in at her room—not a cottage by ordinary standards, but an elegant three-story building with eighteen cure porches. She must have passed a winter unlike any other in her memory, wrapped in blankets outside on her porch as temperatures dipped past thirty below zero. But she probably found comfort in the familiar food, language, and company of the other Latino patients, some of whom may have been friends or relations from back home.

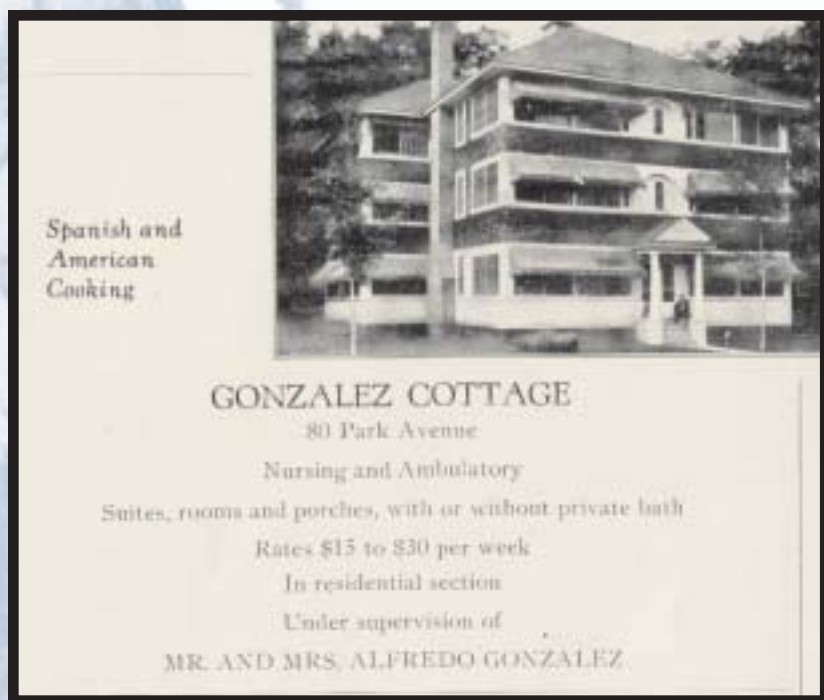
Only about a quarter of the Latino patients stayed in the Gonzalez' hostel; the rest lived scattered throughout the village. A sample of 184 patients with Spanish surnames turned up eighty separate homes that hosted them. Along with other international patients, Latinos mixed into the daily life of the village, adding to an atmosphere that was both small-town friendly and cosmopolitan. At the Gonzalez' hostel, Mercedes spoke Spanish, ate Latin American cuisine, and listened to Latin music. As soon as she was well enough, Alfredo invited her to take part in community activities.

A Man for All Seasons

Alfredo Gonzalez was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1903. Stricken by TB as a young college student, he came to Saranac Lake in 1920 seeking a cure. He found it in thoracoplasty, a radical operation in which ribs were removed in order to collapse and thus provide rest for the diseased lung. In 1926, Alfredo met and married a visitor from Havana, Alicia Milanes del Prado, a short, stout, soft-spoken woman twenty years his senior. The couple soon opened their first "cure cottage" catering to Latin American

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Mercedes Andino spent five years away from her home in Cuba recuperating from tuberculosis in Saranac Lake. Her registration card records both her first name and country incorrectly.



The only Spanish-speaking “cure cottage” in Saranac Lake offered eighteen cure porches. The Saranac Lake Society for the Control of Tuberculosis oversaw the disinfection of rooms and enforced the use of sputum cups. Signs all around town warned of fines for spitting.

patients; over the next forty years they would operate several such cottages in Saranac Lake, the largest and longest-running one at 80 Park Avenue.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Alfredo also inaugurated a number of community projects, including the annual Harvest Hop dance at the Hotel Saranac from 1942 to 1952. The first hop was a gala affair with a Latin American theme; the Pan-American Union in Washington, D.C. loaned a set of large flags representing the twenty-one Latin republics to decorate the hotel ballroom. The event included a Latin dance contest; a beauty pageant with each female

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contestant representing a different Latin American country; a New York City band, Señor Uvanni and His Caballeros; and the singer Louisa Paván Hennessey.

Several local Latin American families helped Alfredo with the organization and planning of 1948's hop, retitled the Fiesta Hop. Events included a costume ball; a samba exhibition by Mr. and Mrs. P.J. Serrales (of the wealthy Don Q. Rum family); and entertainment by Benito Collada, owner of the El Chico Nightclub in New York, famous singer and dancer Rosita Ríos, and Raúl Barragan's five-piece orchestra. Local photographer Bernard Acosta of Costa Rica recorded the festivities. The Fiesta Hop also showcased one of Alfredo's most prestigious guests, Lieutenant Colonel Mario Vargas, the Venezuelan war hero and chief of the armed forces. Many old-timers in Saranac Lake still remember the general's heavily medaled uniform, as well as the two Venezuelan presidents, Rómulo Gallegos and Rómulo Bentancourt, who came to visit him in town.

The Communities Mingle

The Harvest Hop was the main fundraiser for the Study and Craft Guild, an organization that provided TB patients with occupational therapy and diversion from the long, boring hours on the cure porch. Alfredo Gonzalez served on the guild's board of directors for many years, helped start an Americanization English Class, and was one of its most popular teachers of Spanish. Both locals and patients clamored to sign up for his classes. He taught as many as one hundred students a week, meeting with students at five local sanatoria. To make the classes more accessible to bedridden patients, Alfredo helped arrange for a popular *Time Magazine* radio series, “Let Us Learn Spanish,” to be broadcast on a local radio station.

Alfredo also tapped into his students' interest-by-proximity in the language and culture of Latin America by starting a Spanish Club, which met on a regular basis through the 1940s and 50s. These monthly meetings were an opportunity for non-Hispanic community members and patients to experience Latino culture and to converse in Spanish. Records show that Mercedes Andino helped serve refreshments at a Spanish Club party in November, 1941.



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In a photo album belonging to the Gonzalez family, who operated one of the “cure cottages,” this picture is simply entitled “Spanish people”—presumably visitors and patients in Saranac Lake.

At this and other community events, Mercedes socialized with local Latin American patients and their families. Some were new acquaintances, but others, like Pilar Benero, were old friends from Cuba. Pilar (néé Gordon), from a family of physicians, had accompanied her sister who was ill with TB to Saranac Lake in 1925. There she met Manolo Benero, who had left Puerto Rico in 1917 seeking the cure. Manolo and Pilar soon married and settled down in the village to raise two sons.

The Benero Family

For many Latino patients, their humdrum, often difficult existence in Saranac Lake must have contrasted starkly with the wealthy lives of leisure they had led back home. This was particularly true for Pilar Benero, who came from one of Cuba's wealthiest and most prominent families but who settled in Saranac Lake to live out a middle-class life in a small brick house. While the Beneros mingled happily with the townspeople, they also socialized with the wealthy elite of Cuba and Latin America. Pilar taught Spanish classes to local children and held piano recitals with her close friend Dita, wife of the composer Bela Bartók, one of Saranac Lake's “famous” TB patients. Manolo, host to a stream of Latin American guests, also worked in the office of a local laundry and was a member of the Lions, Rotary, and Fish and Game Clubs. Their sons Joseph and Manny played hockey and grew up speaking English with the slightly Canadian twang of a North Country accent,

although at home they spoke Spanish with family and visitors. The Beneros lived the rest of their lives in Saranac Lake; today their headstones stand out in the Catholic cemetery, the only ones with Spanish surnames.

The End of an Era

With the development of antibiotics following World War II, the TB “cure industry” began a steep decline. By the mid-1950s, wealthy Latino patients were no longer making the journey to Saranac Lake; their absence, both culturally and financially, was keenly felt. Alfredo and Alicia Gonzalez moved to New York City in 1962, where they died in 1965. And like so many children born and raised at the end of the boom times of the TB era, Joseph and Manny Benero left Saranac Lake after their high school graduation in the Forties. With their departure, the village lost its only two native-born Spanish speakers.

In recent years, Saranac Lake, proud of its vibrant and colorful past as a world-famous health resort, has experienced a renewal. Many of the old cure cottages, as well as the train station, have been restored to their original state, and tourist money has fueled a revival of interest in the town's unique history. The Latin Americans, whose circumstances took them far from their homelands during the cure years, make up an important part of that history. ■

Amy Catania reconstructed the world of the Latin American patients in Saranac Lake by consulting the Adirondack Room archives of the Saranac Lake Free Library. She found that, starting in 1907, the Saranac Lake Society for the Control of Tuberculosis registered each patient upon his or her arrival, recording the patient's name, age, former address, and other personal information on “TB cards” and instructing them in the prevention of the disease's spread. A sample taken from some 30,000 of these cards, and a survey of the two hundred most common Spanish surnames, created a larger sample of 184 Spanish-speaking patients who stayed in Saranac Lake between the years 1907 and 1958.

Information gleaned from archived copies of local papers, such as the Adirondack Enterprise and the Guild News, contributed greatly to the research. These papers carried accounts of famous guests and special events where Latin American patients mixed with the local community.

A high point of the research came when the author tracked down Joe and Manny Benero, the two native Spanish-speaking sons of Saranac Lake, both now living in Texas. Conversations and interviews with these brothers brought alive the largely forgotten story of the Latin American experience in Saranac Lake.