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The Roots of 'Hispanic'

1975 Committee of Bureaucrats Produced Designation

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During Hispanic Heritage Month, Grace Flores-Hughes did not dance at any galas, sit on any panels or receive any awards. And when the annual celebration ends today, the 57-year-old Mexican American will look back on another year of being forgotten.

Hardly anyone knows that 28 years ago, Flores-Hughes and a handful of other Spanish-speaking federal employees helped make the decision that changed how people with mixed Spanish heritage would be identified in this country. In 1975, when Flores-Hughes was a baby-faced bureaucrat working for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, she sat on the highly contentious Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions. "We chose the word 'Hispanic,'" she said proudly in a recent interview. The choice resounded throughout the federal government, including at the Office of Management and Budget, which placed the word on census forms for the first time in 1980. But the decision touched off a debate in the wider community over whether "Latino" should have been the designated term, and that debate still rages. Flores-Hughes, a federal appointee who lives in Alexandria, does not engage in it. She is more concerned with setting the record straight. "People keep saying that Richard Nixon is the reason why we're called 'Hispanic,'" she said. "And I think, 'Where did they get that from?' "But no one can be blamed for not knowing. Few records survive to document the committee's existence or its work. A search of the federal Education Resources Information Center yielded a single report that includes a list of members and the chairman, Charles Johnson of the Census Bureau. Even former representative Robert Garcia (D-N.Y.), who worked diligently for a "Hispanic" designation in those days, said, "I didn't know the committee existed." The story of how the term came to be embraced by government is more important than ever, Flores-Hughes said, because it is crucial to the debate over whether to identify people as "Hispanic" or "Latino," a debate that vexes the Spanish-speaking and Spanish-surnamed community and non-Hispanic Americans with connections to it. "Latino" refers to the Latin-based Romance languages of Spain, France, Italy and Portugal. The term embraces Portuguese-speaking Brazilians in a way that the word "Hispanic" does not. "Hispanic" is an American derivation from "Hispania," the Spanish-language term for the cultural diaspora created by Spain. That diaspora is the result of a bygone age of conquest, which disturbs many of the people who prefer "Latino." "For us Spaniards, there's always a very strong link to the Spanish-speaking people across the Atlantic," said Javier Ruperez, the Spanish ambassador to the United States. "They are part of the Spanish family." Ruperez said he understands that people who prefer "Latino" "want to follow their own path. But it hurts. I think it's untrue to say that 'Hispanic' reflects imperialism. Our history is a part of human history. Empires come and go." Abdin Noboa-Rios, a member of the ad hoc committee, said some members wanted to use the Spanish-language term "Hispano," but were overruled by others who felt that "Hispanic" would be less confusing, even though it is rarely used outside the United States. A survey by the Pew Hispanic Center and Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation last year found that a majority of Hispanics and Latinos -- 53 percent -- have no preference for either term. An overwhelming majority prefer to identify themselves by national origin. But among those who listed a preference, "Hispanic" was widely favored. Activists, however, assert that "Latino" is fast

becoming the favored term, as students, intellectuals and scholars refer to it almost exclusively in their works. Flores-Hughes said those activists wrongly insist that "Hispanic" was thrust on them by white bureaucrats who knew very little about their culture. Members of the ad hoc committee said it was hastily formed early in 1975, after educators of Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican and Native American descent stormed out of a meeting called to discuss a report at the Federal Interagency Committee on Education. The group never got around to discussing the report, on the education of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Indians. They were livid over how it wrongly identified certain groups. As Flores-Hughes put it, "they came ready for bear." Caspar W. Weinberger, secretary of Health, Education and Welfare at the time, knew he had a problem. He ordered that a committee be convened to solve the identity matter for good. The committee included African Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Caucasians and Native Americans, in addition to Latinos. During the year they met, arguments erupted over now-outdated terms such as "colored" and "Oriental." But the most contentious arguments took place in the group that blended Spanish and English. It included Flores-Hughes of HEW, Philip (Felipe) Garcia of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Noboa-Rios of the National Institute of Education and Paul Planchon of the Office of Management and Budget. "There was never any consensus in that group to the very end," said oboa-Rios, who preferred the term "Latino" and still does. "We came up with an agreement, but . . . there were some bad feelings. I know two people who didn't speak for up to a year after it was over." Noboa-Rios said he agreed to "Hispanic," because "we had to transcend labels. For the purposes of the census it was important to know who we were, because we were an underrepresented population." He remembered Flores-Hughes, but vaguely. Her name was Grace Flores then, and she was 26 years old. She was a low-level employee in the Special Concerns section of HEW, with only a high school education, serving on her first board. "I was like a little kid involved in every aspect of the office," she said. Flores-Hughes went on to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of the District of Columbia and a master's in public administration from Harvard University. She now lectures on managing a culturally diverse workforce in the public/private sector and serves as an appointee to the Federal Service Impasses Panel of the Federal Labor Relations Authority. Flores-Hughes grew up in Taft, Tex., not far from Corpus Christi. Her grandfather regaled her with stories about serving in the army of Pancho Villa. He was originally from Spain, she said, and his family moved to Mexico. "I was called a 'wetback,' a 'Mexkin' and a 'dirty Mexkin,'" she said. "In public school, I had to be careful what I said. If I spoke Spanish, they would send me home for three days." Her driver's license identified her as Latin American. That was going through her mind when arguments were raging on the committee. " 'Hispanic' was better than anything I had been called as a kid," she said. "Latino," she said, would have included Italians, so she would not endorse it. And "Spanish surname" would have given protection to people who had never been discriminated against, she said. Besides, she said, not everyone in the Spanish diaspora has a Spanish-sounding name. "It was hard eliminating all those terms," she said. "I felt alone. But I was determined to stick to 'Hispanic.' We kept going back to Spain. We couldn't get away from it."

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In an effort to make government more accessible to the nation's 28.1 million Spanish speakers, the General Services Administration (GSA) has unveiled "FirstGov en Español," a portal that allows users to access tens of thousands of pages of federal and state Spanish-language Web pages. Using FirstGov en Español, the U.S. Spanish-speaking population can obtain information on a wide variety of topics such as health, education, housing, benefits, citizenship and

voting. Visitors can also perform various online transactions, all in Spanish, and can phone in or email questions, all answered in Spanish.

To access the new website, click on www.espanol.gov.