

Mexican American History: 1846-1940

The Great Migration, The Depression, WWII



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With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, naturally, the majority of Mexicanos believed that this meant equality across the board regarding who owned what in terms of land and territory and national borders. The treaty gave the U.S. the land comprised of modern day California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. In turn the U.S. paid Mexico \$15 million. In the end Mexican citizens living in those territories were given the option of becoming U.S. citizens or moving back to Mexico with promised security of their property rights if they chose to stay. Even more interesting, in certain cases, those who stayed in New Mexico were allowed to stay as Mexican citizens. Naturally, the U.S. didn't honor every promise and even made amendments to the treaty and other documents stating their safety of property or honoring their citizenship, as seen with the example of the Californios (Gonzales, 87).

As the 1890s passed, the number of immigrants coming from Mexico rose greatly. With a lack of administration at the U.S.-Mexican border, Mexicanos flooded illegally into America up until the 1930s. Even with the passing of the Reed-Johnson Immigration Act of 1924, the enforcement of literacy and fee requirements were practically non-existent (Gonzales, 113).

But before getting too far ahead of ourselves, let's take a look back on the beginnings of the Mexican Revolution lasting from 1910-1920. With the people's unhappiness rising with the one-man dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, rebellion was stirred into the hearts of many citizens. Though Diaz promised to strengthen the economy and restore power to the central government, he ultimately chose to turn to foreign capital (Gonzales, 116). The decision may have seemed to be the right choice initially, the cons far outweighed the pros for the country's citizens, disrupting communities and creating widespread loss of agricultural lands. This paved the way for riots leaving many towns and communities in shambles from burning and looting. Having

lost their homes and land, many Mexicanos found solace in moving into the Southwestern states where Mexican colonies had already been established.

With the Southwest being the most easily accessible area for these immigrants, the Mexican population drastically increased in the states. The abundance of jobs was another very attractive aspect to the poor Mexicano peasant. Mining and railroad work were among the most abundant jobs, though certainly not the best. Mexican workers were often segregated from white miners, as well as given less pay compared to the white miner (Gonzales, 122). This prejudice trend is something that would last for decades to come, as it was a cheaper and more efficient way for farmers, or anyone else who hired Mexicanos, to increase their product output. Asians were another cheap source of labor, however, workers tended to slowly disappear from the fields, unlike Mexicano workers who tended to be much more reliable.

An immigrants life was difficult without a doubt. They were taken advantage of, abused, and given less care than that of the white worker. Contratista, or contractor, of Mexicano workers were no exception. They often made sure to pay their workers as little as possible in order to boost their own profits, as well as withhold money until the last day of the season in order to ensure their workers would stay. But there was not much the workers could do. Those who stood up for themselves by protesting were often expelled from the country as illegal aliens (Gonzales, 131).

Let's compare the immigrant experience between Europeans and Mexicans. If you're thinking that the European immigrants had it easier then you would be correct. Europeans were able to buy themselves plots of land or find more industrialized jobs. They could easily work themselves into the middles class of American society largely thanks to the color of their skin, compared to Mexicanos who predominantly remained in the working class. Though some groups

of Europeans, mostly those with different religious backgrounds such as Jews and Italians, faced prejudice, it was the Mexicanos who faced daily turmoils and struggles when it came to comfortable living in American society.

With the westward movement of the majority of Mexicanos settling down in the major cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, the growth of the Mexican middle class was soon at hand. The crashing of the stock market in 1929 caused daily life for Mexican immigrants become even more difficult. The Dust Bowl caused the migration of not only Mexicanos, but also the farmers and their families who had lost their ranches and homes. With the moving of Mexican immigrants into more urban settings, barrios, or districts featuring large populations of Mexicanos, began to develop. Assimilation into urban society was not easy, more so because of the large number of native born whites and Europeans who saw their presence as a means of competition in procuring jobs. Within police departments especially, discrimination ran rampant, as officers believed that Mexicans were criminals by nature (Gonzales 143). But barrios did offer certain comforts for those struggling with urban life. They offered a place of refuge and a sense of community for Mexicanos where their culture and lifestyles and language was around every corner. While many European immigrants tended to return home after a while, the strong sense of community and familial ties, not to mention the closeness to their home country, seems to have kept the Mexican people strong even during the hardships and prejudice they had to endure.

Even with this strong sense of community created by barrios in urban areas, nativism still posed a large threat. There were those who felt the need to keep America “pure” (Gonzales, 147). This mindset is mostly thought to have been an after effect of the First World War causing an uprising of xenophobia in native born Americans as seen in the passing of the 1917 act that limited the entry of European immigrants. The large migration of Mexicano immigrants to urban

cities did not help in relieving nativist's fears of endangering whites. Though with very little evidence, it was believed that the rise in Mexicans created a rise in crime and the lowering of educational standards; a popular theory of the 1920s. Another widespread theory was the idea that Mexicans were dirty, lazy, and violent, though this idea mainly rose as a result of the Texas revolt and Mexican-American War (Gonzales, 147). Stereotypes ran rampant in the 20s, many of them popularized by Hollywood. Some people went as far to refer to them as "mongrels" and "human swine", ideals that are sadly still seen in our culture today.

A result of this pent up prejudice and racial stereotypes brought about a major period of repatriation of Mexicanos. Between 1929-1935 around 400,00 Mexicanos were sent back to their home country (Gonzales, 149). Naturally, not all of these accounts were done by legal means. Many were forced to leave against their will and even native born children of immigrants, who had naturally become U.S. citizens by birth, were forced to leave with their parents. The worst of the repatriation occurred in Texas where the struggling agriculture economy and racial tensions drove Mexicanos out of the state in massive quantities. By the end of 1931, an estimated 50,000-75,000 had returned to Mexico (Gonzales, 150).

This isn't to say that these immigrants had given up without a fight. In truth the early 1900s saw an uprising of strikes initiated by Mexicanos who desired to better their economic and over-all living status in the U.S. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was the first union to dominate the 1900s. However, this union sought to support workers with skills while the majority of Mexican workers were indeed unskilled. They instead turned to Mexicano associations known as mutualistas. These organizations were fairly new and therefore not experienced enough to fight for economic gain, but they did help in the fight to improve working conditions. As previously mentioned, mutualistas were too new going into the twentieth century

therefore causing strikes to become a common practice. However, early strikes lasting from the early 1900s to the 30s experienced short-lived victories or failed completely due to disorganization or lack of support among its ranks (Gonzales 157). Overall this early era of the twentieth century saw the start of many uprisings and failures. But a chain reaction seems to have been started among the working class Mexicanos. These uprisings and strikes would surely inspire the next generations of immigrants and American born Mexican children who desired more than anything to fit into American society.

The arrival of the Second World War came for many Mexican-Americans as an opportunity to show their patriotism in hopes of being accepted into American society. Something I had never known before was that many jumped at the opportunity to enlist causing the Mexicano enlistment rate to skyrocket. I was never even aware that so many Mexicans had joined the fight against the Axis powers in WWII. In fact, Gonzales states that “Mexicanos were one of the most highly decorated ethnic groups in the U.S. Armed Forces,” (Gonzales, 164). Not only did joining the war help them with self-esteem, it helped them to mingle with white soldiers, which tended to be positive experiences as they had to fight against a common enemy. The color of one’s skin did not seem to matter on the battle field, but I tie this into the idea that Mexicano workers are expendable as they had been wherever they chose to find work in the U.S. Perhaps the reason that so many of them were allowed to join the army is because the government saw them not as human beings but as pawns to be thrown into battle in order to move the more valuable pieces out of harms way. Those who did survive the war managed to receive benefits of many kinds, however. Veteran benefits provided jobs, education, and homes for them to live in, (Gonzales, 167). Financial aid was also given to those who lost their children in the war. As the war waged on women Mexicano workers were able to resume the rolls that used to belong to the

men now in the service. They continued to work in the fields and even found their way into industrial jobs. The war proved to be very successful for anyone of Mexican origin, women and men alike.

Though benefits from the war seemed abundant, it naturally also had its setbacks. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, racial discrimination against Japanese-Americans became aggravated. The American public once again lashed out with extreme xenophobia, sending every immigrant and American citizen of Japanese background to internment camps. The loss of so many Asian farm workers paved the way for the Bracero Program lasting from 1942-1964. This program brought over a quarter of a million Mexican men into the States as hired work. Yet again, the promises of fair treatment regarding health, housing, food, wages, and working hours were often ignored by the farmers as well as the U.S. government (Gonzales 176).

In comparison with Howard Zinn's work in chapter 11, a similar theme of abuse, neglect, and corruption can be seen between the two. The rise of capitalism in the late 1800s seems to have started a trend in which those at the high end of the ladder do whatever it takes to ensure that they receive the largest amount of money or product or capital as seen through Morgan, Rockefeller, Carnegie, and other powerful capitalists at the time. Zinn explains: "Morgan had escaped military service in the Civil War by paying \$300 to a substitute," and goes on to explain that so had Rockefeller, Carnegie, Armour, Gould, and Mellon (Zinn, 2). It seemed to be a common practice to buy their way out of situations or buying some sort of product and then turning around selling it for at least double the original price. In most instances even the Supreme Court was on the side of the capitalists, giving the ever famous ruling that "corporations are people too," giving them the same rights as individuals. In 1886 the Supreme Court managed to relieve 230 state laws that regulated corporations (Zinn, 7). Power was in the

hands of the ruling elite and that power only came with money. I wonder what kind of lifestyle Mexicanos would have had had they have made fair amounts of money to live by instead of working their lives away at the expense of farmers and business owners. Would they have received more respect from the American public if money was not a problem for them? It seems possible, but how can we know for sure. What can be said for sure is that they must have struggled the most compared with any ethnic group living in the U.S. at the time. They struggled against constant racial prejudice that had been ingrained into the minds of native-born white Americans thanks to stereotypes and misinformation. Mexicanos deserve so much more than what they were given, so much more care than the hatred they were shown. This history of this country sickens me, especially when so many people were fed and kept alive during trying times thanks to the labors and hardships and battles that Mexicanos endured.

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