

## IMMIGRATION: *AL NORTE*

Voy a los Estados Unidos	I'm going to the United States
Para ganar la vida	To earn a living
Adiós, mi tierra querida	Good-bye my beloved country
Te llevo en mi corazón	I carry you in my heart
<i>"Corrido del Inmigrante"</i>	<i>"Ballad of the Immigrant"</i>

A truckload of Mexican migrants returning to their homes in the Rio Grande Valley from Mississippi where they had been picking cotton in October 1939.

(Library of Congress, FSA Project, photograph by Russell Lee.)

Changing one's place of residence in the eternal quest for a better life is a common historical phenomenon. The wave of expatriates continues unabated to the present time.<sup>1</sup> The ebb and flow of migration has always resulted in increased tension and apprehension. This has been especially true when immigration involved significant numbers of newcomers or outsiders. Differences in class, language, religion, culture, and race or ethnicity have traditionally tended to estrange new arrivals from the established or native residents. These diverse factors have fostered divisiveness and exerted a negative influence even in modern times. There were many critical factors that determined an immigrant's role and place in the new society.

Mexicans emigrating to the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century encountered the same problems and challenges as former immigrants. They found that their adjustment to American society was profoundly influenced by such factors as social class, culture, language, religion, and ethnicity. Seemingly, no immigrant group has escaped the stigma attached to their particular nationality or place of origin. Each new group must "pay its dues" before being

accepted or assimilated by their adopted country. By a sheer stroke of fate, immigration from south of the border coincided with the end of massive European immigration.

Traditionally, it has been the lure of steady employment that has enticed Mexicans to come to America. Not many of them made the trek north with the intention of becoming permanent residents or of seeking U.S. citizenship. They came *por sólo un poquito tiempo* (for only a little while). Most of them intended to return home after they had accumulated a financial nest egg. The passage of time and acculturation to “Yankee ways” dimmed or subverted their original intent. For them, the border was merely an inconvenience. Traffic moved easily in both directions almost at will.

Although Mexicans are often regarded or treated as recent arrivals, they are actually part of a well-established community in the United States. Mexicans have resided in the Pacific Southwest—especially in the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—since the halcyon days of the missions and the ranchos of storied folklore. However, the number of Mexican Nationals increased dramatically when immigrants began pouring into the area after the turn of the century. “The large numbers of Mexicans . . . arriving daily to Los Angeles,” observed Mexican Consul Guillermo Andrade, “is truly notable.”<sup>2</sup> In 1908, economist Victor S. Clark echoed Andrade’s observation. In a report to the U.S. Labor Department, he noted that an increasing number of Mexicans were living outside of the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> This dispersement continued to grow over the years. By the 1920s Mexicans could be found harvesting sugar beets in Minnesota, laying railroad tracks in Kansas, packing meat in Chicago, mining coal in Oklahoma, assembling cars in Detroit, canning fish in Alaska, and sharecropping in Louisiana.

Adventurous immigrant families and single men fanned out across the United States from border to border and sea to sea. Among them were Genaro Torres and

three companions who worked their way along the gulf states and eventually settled in Portsmouth, Virginia. There, the town's only Spanish-speaking family befriended them. Torres, formerly a major in Francisco Villa's army, finally felt safe and secure. He had been captured at the battle of Agua Prieta, across the border from Douglas, Arizona, and sentenced to death by the Federales, but had escaped. Fearing for his life and safety, he obtained a "safe-conduct pass" to leave Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Like many other immigrants, he had no intention of remaining permanently in the United States. He planned to return to Mexico as soon as it was opportune or safe to do so.

In Portsmouth, he learned the cobbler's trade and got a job in a shoe repair shop. Like many married men, once established he sent for his wife, who was waiting for him in the city of Guanajuato with their three young children. Before joining the Villistas, Torres had been the mayordomo of a local hacienda. Due to his influential connections, his wife, Wenceslada, affectionately known as Vence, was able to obtain a letter guaranteeing her safe passage to the border. This enabled Vence to join her husband Genaro without any serious incident, even during the chaos of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

The massive flow of Mexicans to the United States grew dramatically during and after the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The increase was reflected in the official statistics of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as in reports of Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), the Department of Foreign Relations. While the two governments varied in their reporting procedures, the assessments by both indicated that at least half a million Mexicans entered the United States legally between 1899 and 1928.<sup>6</sup> United States census takers in 1930 calculated that approximately 1,422,533 Mexican Nationals and Mexican Americans lived in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Knowledgeable historians and

demographers conclude that by 1930 more than 10 percent of Mexico's entire population was residing in the United States.

The preceding statistics were undeniable evidence that Mexicans were the largest new immigrant group in the United States. These quantitative figures provided misleading undercounts. Research indicates that in all probability more than a million Mexicans entered the United States before the advent of the Great Depression. These revised estimates have taken into account those who entered without proper documentation. These undocumented migrants, as is the case even today, feared detection and avoided government surveys and census takers.<sup>8</sup> Even though a precise count was impossible, Mexican emigration was truly phenomenal and ranks as one of the great mass movements in history. The onset of immigration drastically transformed the nature and character of the Spanish-speaking population in the American Southwest. It also added extensively to the growth of Mexican colonias and enclaves in other parts of the United States. Except for the state of New Mexico, where the offspring of the settlers who came during the Spanish/Mexican era remained a majority, in other areas the new immigrants quickly outnumbered the original Spanish or Mexican residents.

Mexican immigrants were usually associated with unskilled, backbreaking jobs and marginal or menial occupations. The Dillingham Commission Report, an early immigration study, noted that "the members of this race have always been the hewers of wood and drawers of water."<sup>9</sup> The castelike employment pattern that developed was a very effective way of denying Mexican Nationals as well as native-born U.S. Mexicans the opportunity to attain better or higher-paying jobs. Even though some Mexicans had the requisite skills, training, or experience qualifying them for skilled positions, they were restricted to *pico y pala*, or pick and shovel work. The prevailing discrimination encountered in seeking meaningful employment was readily attested to by many early immigrants. Merchant Eduardo

Negrete and optometrist Dr. Reynaldo Carreón recalled the prejudice of the larger American society when attempting to market their goods and services.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of being relegated to unskilled, poor-paying jobs, Mexicans continued to trek north. During the early part of the century, crossing over into the United States was relatively easy. Immigrants Ramón Curiel from Jalisco, Pablo Alcántara from Durango, and Jesús Casárez from Michoacán all recalled that their entry into the United States consisted merely of walking or wading across the border. Others, such as Juan Rodríguez, avoided the inconvenience of wading the river by paying a penny to walk across a small footbridge spanning the Rio Grande.<sup>11</sup> These and numerous other testimonies confirm the fact that there were few legal barriers imposed on Mexican immigration during the early decades of the twentieth century. It should be noted that Congress did not impose the eight-dollar head tax or require Mexican Nationals to pass a literacy test until 1917.<sup>12</sup> While many immigration laws were passed during this early period, their enforcement was usually extremely lax.

These were seldom more than sixty Bureau of Immigration agents stationed along the entire length of the U.S.–Mexican border at any one time. This was ludicrous, to say the least, for the International Boundary between the two countries stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. This is a distance of nearly two thousand miles and spans the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. In 1924, Congress, recognizing the growing traffic along the border, belatedly established the U.S. Border Patrol with a complement of 450 agents. This limited force was responsible for patrolling both the Mexican and Canadian borders. The primary impetus for creating the new agency was to stop the smuggling of Asians and Europeans into the United States. Those aliens, rather than the Mexicans, were perceived as a threat to the integrity of America's northern and southern borders. Although deterring Mexican immigration was not

the main concern of the bill, the new legislation did establish regulations that could be applied to immigrants from Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

However, the Border Patrol and the Immigration Service exercised their extensive police powers selectively. This was done in order to serve the needs of influential growers and industrialists. Regulations were loosely enforced when Mexican workers were needed to harvest crops or increase production in the mines or on the assembly lines. Conversely, the strict letter of the law was applied when Mexican labor exceeded the seasonal demand. Then, deportation raids at the work sites, usually before payday, became common occurrences. The raids were sometimes conducted at the request of unscrupulous employers. The Border Patrol and the Immigration Service were often assisted in their roundups by local police and sheriff's deputies.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Mexican communities viewed local law-enforcement agencies with fear, enmity, and distrust.

Although the United States government did not consider the Mexicans a serious immigration threat during the early twentieth century, neither were they greeted or welcomed with open arms. Mexicans were often accorded rude treatment, even when following official procedures and seeking legal entry. Immigration officials consistently displayed disdain and obnoxious behavior toward Mexican Nationals. Immigrants were repeatedly forced to wait long, tedious hours before being serviced. It was not unusual for them to wait patiently all day long only to be told that they must return again the following day and endure the same arduous procedure. During the process, all immigrants, men, women, and children, were herded into crowded, examination pens. As many as five hundred to six hundred persons were detained there for endless hours without benefit of drinking fountains or toilet facilities. Mexican immigrants viewed the mass public baths and clothing disinfections as indignities.<sup>15</sup>

The immigrants resolutely endured these degrading procedures because they had no other choice. America provided their only hope for a better life. Parents sought gainful employment for themselves and educational opportunities for their children. Neither of these were deemed readily available in their native land. A variety of socioeconomic and political factors combined to generate and foster the compelling necessity to leave the land of their birth. For Mexicans, a major factor contributing to their plight was the scarcity of good farmland. Early twentieth-century Mexico was an agriculturally oriented nation. Over 90 percent of the people lived on farms, ranches, or in rural villages. Yet, despite long, arduous backbreaking work, even in the best of times, its agrarian population barely eked out a living. Each year, fewer and fewer farmers were able to support themselves by tilling the increasingly marginal land. The amount of good farmland barely equaled that found in the combined states of Iowa and Nebraska.

Sparse rainfall also made agriculture a difficult and precarious undertaking. Only about 12 percent of Mexico receives adequate and timely rainfall. This is particularly critical in the Central Plateau, where the majority of the Mexican population has traditionally resided. Only 10 percent of the Central Plateau is suitable for the production of foodstuffs. This region includes the states of México, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Jalisco, and Aguascalientes. This area contributed more than two-thirds of Mexico's immigrants to the United States.<sup>16</sup> Compounding the situation was Mexico's dramatic increase in population. Demographers have estimated that Mexico mushroomed from approximately nine million people in 1876 to over fifteen million inhabitants in 1910.<sup>17</sup>

Coincidentally, this period encompassed the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Under his reign, Mexico experienced an expanding land monopoly controlled by a few rich agriculturalists, commonly referred as *hacendados*. These individuals were often foreign or absentee landowners living in Mexico City, the United

States, or Europe. Aided by favorable government legislation and a sympathetic legal system, these land barons acquired massive tracts of Mexico's national domain as well as control of *ejidos*, lands formerly farmed collectively.<sup>18</sup> This avaricious accumulation of land resulted in over five million families losing their small farms or plots of land. In 1910, the agricultural population of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato was at a record high of approximately 2,537,625 persons. Nonetheless, only 3.2 percent of the rural heads of households owned any property.<sup>19</sup>

The disparity between the increase in population and the loss of land and homesteads made life in the countryside extremely austere for countless *campesinos*, or farm workers. These two factors created a large, landless labor force that could be readily exploited. Wages for rural peasants never rose above fifteen cents per day from 1876 to 1910, the span of the Porfiriato dictatorship. Whereas wages remained low, the costs of basic commodities and food increased significantly. The price of corn, the staple of the poor working class, rose by more than 50 percent from 1877 to 1903.<sup>20</sup> Such a momentous increase in this vital mainstay of the campesino's diet was due to a shift in agricultural priorities.

A booming international market for sugar, coffee, henequen, cotton, and cattle meant greater profits. This financial windfall convinced large landowners to shift to ranching and the cultivation of export crops. Predictably, less land was allocated to the planting of crops required for sustaining the peones' meager diet. Visitors to the Porfirian countryside often encountered campesinos who were barely able to subsist on a near-starvation diet of corn tortillas, beans, and a few vegetables. Hunger and malnutrition were accepted facts of life. Reports of actual starvation in the Mexican countryside were not uncommon.

Accolades were heaped on Porfirio Díaz's administration for creating a stable government and a profitable commercial environment. This achievement was

attributed to the *pax porfiriato*, the first prolonged era of peace and order in Mexico since the overthrow of Spanish rule. An equally critical factor was the extensive increase of foreign investments. Given what amounted to *carte blanche* by the government, foreign investors took the lead in developing the lucrative oil and railroad industries. Foreigners were also the chief proponents in reviving the mining and textiles industries, which once had been thriving enterprises but had been allowed to languish and stagnate.

This overpowering foreign influence gave rise to the popular refrain, “Mexico, mother of foreigners and stepmother of Mexicans.” The statement probably best summarized the pro-foreign policies and practices of the Porfiriato regime. In reality, along with foreign entrepreneurs, a small, elite native bourgeoisie developed. It believed fervently in the sanctity of the free-market concept of supply and demand. However, the vast majority of Mexicans did not share in nor benefit from the nation’s economic growth. To the contrary, low wages and a declining standard of living further eroded the miserable lot of the average campesino. Thus, many of them, in their relentless search for survival, were forced to leave their rural pueblos and mountain villages in the hope of earning a decent living elsewhere. A few were fortunate enough to find gainful employment in the revitalized mining and textiles industries or in the new oil exploration and railroad-building enterprises. A campesino could earn fifty cents a day working on the railroad, or *el traque*.<sup>21</sup> It was a skill many of them would later find useful in the United States.

By Mexican standards, wages were significantly higher in the northern part of the country. In comparison to other regions, the frontier borderlands traditionally provided better employment opportunities. This was apparent even during the turn of the century. Miners who earned twenty-five cents a day in the Central Plateau could earn three times as much in the quarries of the northern border states.<sup>22</sup> In

spite of the rigorous climate and harsh conditions, the lure of a living wage was too tempting to resist. Once in northern Mexico, the substantially higher wages and steady work to be had on the American side of the border acted as an irresistible magnet. Campesinos simply crossed the *línea*, or international boundary. According to Lucas Lucio, José B. Solórzano, and Enrique Vásquez, these aspects were irresistible factors in influencing their personal decision to emigrate to the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Although pressing economic need was the overwhelming force compelling Mexicans to cross the Río Bravo, some immigrants were also victims of the political turmoil sweeping the country. The Revolution of 1910, the first social revolution of the twentieth century, began as a crusade against the tyrannical and corrupt dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, but it soon developed into a bitter civil war to determine which revolutionary faction would rule Mexico. The Revolution shook the very foundations of Mexico's rigid society. It is frequently cited as a major factor in inducing Mexicans to emigrate. Yet contrary to this popular belief, immigration figures during the war-torn period from 1910 to 1920 were lower than for either the ante- or post-bellum years.<sup>24</sup> The ensuing land-tenure issue was more effective in driving people out of Mexico than the war's lethal bullets or its wanton destruction had been.

The Revolution and its bitter aftermath created a situation that gave the United States an aura of a safe haven. The refugees included not only poor campesinos but also *gente decente*, or people of stature. Among the latter was Adolfo de la Huerta, a major political figure who had served as interim president in 1920. After leading an unsuccessful rebellion against President Alvaro Obregón in 1923, de la Huerta, like many of his disillusioned compatriots, fled to the United States.

Many Catholics seeking sanctuary from the religious upheaval and persecution that followed the Revolution also fled the country. Since gaining its independence

from Spain, the central government's relationship with the Catholic church can best be characterized as tenuous. Nevertheless, a *modus vivendi* had been worked out between the two entities during the Díaz dictatorship. However, the Revolution disrupted the government's precarious relationship with the Roman Catholic church. Apart from the government, the church was the nation's major institution with its vast wealth. Its position was unquestionable since approximately 50 percent of the land was owned or controlled by the church.

Open confrontation between the church and the revolutionary government flared when Archbishop Primate José Mora y del Río, the church's leading spokesman, publicly opposed implementation of the 1917 Constitution. Church leadership viewed the Constitution as a charter for the secularization of Mexico because it espoused the socialist principles and ideals of the Revolution. The revolutionary document sanctioned what the church considered were radical changes in areas that had traditionally been within its domain. The Church's primary objection was the secularization of public education. It was not prepared to cede control over the minds and morals of the young to a government espousing socialistic ideas.

In essence, the gauntlet had been thrown down and the church could either submit or defy the government, by force if necessary. The leaders of the holy crusade managed to mobilize and field armies against the revolutionary infidels. Marching under the banner of "Viva Cristo Rey!" "Long, live Christ the King!", some twenty-five thousand Catholics fought the government's armies from 1926 to 1929. The battle cry of "Viva Cristo Rey" christened this insurrection as the Cristero War or the Cristero Revolt. The government's ruthless suppression of the rebellion precipitated enormous destruction of property and loss of life. Due to the vast amount of destruction in the El Bajío region, the area accounted for over 50 percent of the immigrants fleeing Mexico during the height of the revolt in 1926

and 1927.<sup>25</sup> Resident expatriates, among them Catholic lay leaders José David Orozco and Julio C. Guerrero, welcomed their banished compatriots.<sup>26</sup>

The Cristero Revolt affected families on both sides of the border. Among those adversely affected by the Cristero Revolt were Genero Torres and his family, who had earlier settled in Portsmouth, Virginia. In 1924, the family decided it was safe to return to *la madre patria* and made their way from Virginia to El Paso. “There, we learned that the Cristero Revolt was brewing,” recalled Dan Torres, who had been born while the family lived in Virginia.<sup>27</sup> “Since we were Methodists, we did not believe it would be safe for us to continue our journey. Since we had relatives in California, it seemed a good time to visit them. My dad eventually opened his own shoe repair shop and earned his living as a cobbler.”<sup>28</sup>

Although the revolutionary government prided itself on overthrowing the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and crushing the religious revolt, it was not able to cope with the emigration problem. Emigration actually increased after the 1910 Revolution, much to the chagrin and embarrassment of the new ruling junta. Part of the exodus was due to circumstances beyond the new government’s control. A decade of war had claimed one-tenth of Mexico’s population and its economy was in ruins. The Cristero Revolt and de la Huerta’s insurrection made a bad situation worse. As a result, the government was saddled with financial and social obligations that it was not in a position to resolve.

Plagued with a myriad of domestic problems, the question of emigration was assigned a low priority as the nation struggled to survive. Despite its internal problems and chaotic state, the revolutionary government did attempt to provide some degree of protection for citizens emigrating to the United States. It endeavored to do so via the provisions in Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution. Article 123 stipulated that Mexican immigrants must have a valid, signed contract indicating hours, wages, and conditions of employment. By 1920 the government

had designed a model contract to facilitate implementation of the stated requirements. Unfortunately, this administrative gesture was doomed to failure because the contract proved to be legally unenforceable. Effective implementation required the cooperation of the American government, but it was not forthcoming. The contract, therefore, could no be relied upon to produce any real benefits.

In truth, both nations benefited by ignoring Article 123's protective constraints. Like the Porfiristas, the revolutionary government recognized that emigration served as an important safety valve for relieving political and economic pressures at home. Each campesino who left lessened the burden on the nation's faltering economy. It also meant one less malcontent demanding economic change and political reform. A recurring benefit to the local economy was the fact that Nationals in the United States regularly sent money home to their families. This financial largesse helped to relieve economic pressure on the government.

Especially effective in attracting Mexican workers to the United States was the presence of American economic interests in Mexico. American businesses played key roles, particularly in the major industries of mining, ranching, and railroads prevalent in northern Mexico. Investor William Cornell Green operated mines in Cananea, mining magnate Solomon R. Guggenheim built smelters in Monterrey, and mogul William Randolph Hearst owned ranches in Chihuahua.<sup>29</sup> American companies conducting business in Mexico frequently transported Mexican employees across the border to American plants and facilities. A classic example was Anaconda Copper, which relocated Mexican employees as early as 1908 from northern Sonora to southern Arizona.<sup>30</sup>

Railroad companies and agricultural bureaus followed the example of Anaconda Copper. Other companies preferred obtaining Mexican labor through the use of free-lance labor contractors known as *contratistas* or *enganchistas*. Enganchistas were common in the border cities by the first decade of the twentieth

century.<sup>31</sup> Enganchistas frequently crossed the border, going as far south as the Central Plateau in a relentless search for Mexican labor. The hiring of Mexicans to work in the United States was in clear violation of the contract labor law of 1885. Rarely did the contratista's flagrant disregard of the law lead to criminal charges, convictions, or substantial fines. The enormous profits to be made from the illicit traffic were too tempting and made the risk worthwhile. Additional profits were drawn from fees garnisheed from the wages of the workers. Excessive profiteering was generated by charging the workmen exorbitant prices for transportation and sustenance.<sup>32</sup>

Among the more notorious cases of ill treatment by enganchistas was the virtual imprisonment of Mexican laborers on ships from San Francisco and Seattle bound for the salmon canneries in Alaska. Money paid in advance enticed Mexican workers to sign contracts to work in Alaska. Contracts were written only in English and were usually incomprehensible to most Mexican workers. The contracts required cannery workers to follow all orders given by the foreman: to work all day, seven days a week, and to eat only Chinese food. The employees were also required to waive all rights to request higher wages or better working conditions.<sup>33</sup> As early as 1917, the Mexican embassy complained to the American State Department upon learning of Mexican workers being shanghaied to Alaska. Even though the State Department requested action from both the Department of Labor and Department of Commerce, the Mexican embassy reported that "nothing tangible has been obtained." This violation of human rights continued unabated. In 1931, fourteen years later, Mexico City's *El Universal Gráfico* headlined "5,000 Mexicans living as virtual slaves in Alaska." The newspaper claimed that "thousands of Mexicans were stranded in California without work," and were willing to sign up for jobs in the canneries.<sup>34</sup>

The contratistas were a vital factor in providing the workers needed for the spectacular economic growth taking place in the southwestern states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Mexican labor was needed to produce the raw materials and foodstuffs required by the burgeoning industrialization in the Northeast. The number of Mexican workers in the United States increased significantly. The need for cheap labor coincided with the restriction of immigration from Asia and Europe. Beginning in the 1880s, exclusionary laws denied entry to Asian immigrants, particularly to the Chinese and Japanese. Massive European immigration was severely curtailed by the outbreak of World War I. Fear of Bolshevism and disillusionment with postwar Europe resulted in the enactment of immigration quota laws in 1917, 1921, and 1924.<sup>35</sup>

Afraid that the emerging immigration quotas would severely restrict their accessibility to Mexican workers, growers and ranchers took their case to Congress. Agriculturists clamored for the right to import the Mexican workers needed by corporate agriculture and large-scale ranching. Massive reclamation and irrigation projects had been undertaken with the passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act in 1902. These projects made possible the extensive irrigation required for planting melons in the Imperial Valley of California, citrus crops in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, and cotton in the Salt River Valley of Arizona. The sudden extensive development made a cheap source of labor necessary. Growers pleaded for the admission of Mexican workers because “nothing else was available.”<sup>36</sup>

Profitable farming depended on a skilled and readily available labor force. Agricultural production, particularly during the critical harvest season, entailed a labor-intensive process employing vast numbers of agricultural workers. Even more workers were required with the advent of refrigerated railroad cars and improved methods of preserving and packaging vegetables. Perishable, but highly

profitable, exotic fruits and vegetables could now be shipped to the heavily populated eastern cities. Farmers and ranchers first doubled and then tripled production as markets grew and profits soared.

Agricultural expansion stimulated extensive railroad construction in the Southwest. By 1909 there were six railroad companies servicing the region. They employed more than six thousand Mexicans to lay track and to maintain the right-of-way. Working on *el traque* provided ready employment and a relatively easy transition for many Mexicans. Many of them laid track in Mexico before migrating north and finding employment on American railroads. Working on the various railroad lines contributed significantly toward establishing a Mexican presence beyond the Pacific Southwest. As a result of their jobs, Nationals traveled to the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, the Northeast, and virtually every other region of the country. Slowly, around each rail terminus, new enclaves developed. A classic example was Chicago, with a population of approximately twenty-five thousand Mexicans. In Chicago, in addition to working for the railroad, Mexicans secured employment in meat-packing plants, in machine shops, in steel mills, and on the assembly lines. Better-paying jobs in similar industries were also available to Mexicans in Omaha, Gary, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and other major cities of the Midwest and Eastern seaboard.<sup>37</sup>

Only the sugar-beet industry rivaled the railroads in serving as a powerful catalyst in establishing Mexican communities where none had ever existed before. The presence of Mexicans outside of the American Southwest, especially in the Midwest and the mountain states, astonished American society. “How in the world did they [the Mexicans] get way up here; when and why did they come?”<sup>38</sup> The preceding comment was how the International Institute of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) began its report on Mexicans in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Institute investigated the Mexicans as part of its mandate to assist

immigrant and ethnic groups in adjusting to American society. The YWCA's study discovered there were some 1,459 Mexicans living in St. Paul, and observed that many of them were former employees of members of the Sugar Beet Growers Association.<sup>39</sup>

The important relationship between the Mexican and the sugar-beet growers began when the Dingley Tariff Act of 1897 placed a high tax on foreign sugar. This tariff made domestic production of sugar highly profitable, and the sugar beet industry boomed. The industry expanded dramatically from producing 793,000 tons of sugar in 1899 to 3,902,000 tons in 1909 and 7 million tons in 1929.<sup>40</sup> According to a 1933 estimate, the Mexican beet-worker population totaled 55,000 one-third more than in the late 1920s."<sup>41</sup> The *betabelero*, the Mexican sugar-beet worker, became the primary source of labor.

Mining also experienced an unprecedented boom. As in agriculture and manufacturing, mining required a readily available and cheap labor force. Mexicans filled this need perfectly. They usually worked longer shifts and did the most perilous jobs in the bowels of the earth without proper safeguards, lighting, or ventilation. In spite of this, they were paid only half of what white miners earned. The mines were situated in isolated company towns, and workers were strictly segregated. No fraternization or interaction between Mexican and Anglo miners was permitted. Among the worst offenders was the Phelps-Dodge Company. On one occasion when workers rioted in demand for better housing, pay, and working conditions, the protesters were hauled hundreds of miles into the desert and abandoned. No water, food, or means of transportation were provided. It was a severe object lesson for others who might hold similar ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Given the significant contributions made by Mexican workers, when Congress considered applying immigration quotas to Mexico in 1928, growers and ranchers objected strenuously. Among them was Fred H. Bixby, a prominent Southwest

rancher with some 100,000 acres in California and 250,000 acres in Arizona. In an impassioned plea, Mr. Bixby stated: “We have no Chinamen, we have no Japs. The Hindu is worthless, the Filipino is nothing, and the white man will not do the work.”<sup>43</sup> Similar protests were heard from Texas to Alaska and from California to New York. Opposition to restricting immigration was voiced not only by ranchers and farmers, but by industrialists and mine owners as well.

Efforts to restrict Mexican immigration peaked when potent anti-immigration bills were introduced by East Texas Congressman John O. Box and Georgia Senator William J. Harris. Ostensibly, the measures sought to limit immigration from the Western Hemisphere. But opponents believed the true intent was to curb immigration from Mexico. Box and Harris represented cotton-growing areas. Their constituents wanted to reduce or eliminate competition from cotton growers in the Southwest who were employing Mexican labor.<sup>44</sup>

The proposed immigration-quota bills reflected the fears of many politicians, community leaders, and civic organizations. These groups often labeled Mexican Nationals as “the most undesirable people to come under the flag.”<sup>45</sup> Newspapers in Mexico and Spanish-language newspapers in the United States launched a vigorous campaign disparaging the United States for its racist attitudes and calling for the defeat of the proposed legislation.

Eventual defeat of the Harris/Box bills, however, was due primarily to international repercussions rather than to their perceived racial overtones. One of the key deterrents was that if restrictions were applied to Mexico and the rest of the hemisphere, they must also be applied to America’s northern neighbor, Canada. Additionally, restricting immigration from Mexico and South America would generate extremely negative publicity and ill will. The U.S. government was anxious to maintain positive relations in the region because they were perceived as beneficial to American business interests. An increasing amount of raw materials

from Latin America was being imported to sustain the United States' industrial and commercial empire at home and abroad.

Although the Harris/Box bills were defeated, the ensuing debate clearly revealed America's attitude toward Mexican immigrants and the perception of their role or status in American society. Opponents claimed that Mexicans were mentally, physically, and culturally deficient and classified them as substandard human beings. Pseudo-biological arguments were employed to illustrate or to prove the alleged inferiority of all Mexicans. They were depicted as being indolent and amoral, with a proclivity toward criminal behavior.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, proponents of immigration claimed, just as vociferously, that Mexicans were honest, hard workers and ideally suited to perform hard physical labor under the most adverse working conditions.

Among those praising Mexican immigrant labor was Charles C. Teague, president of the California Fruit Growers Exchange. He declared, "Mexican casual labor fills the requirements of the California farm as no other labor has done in the past." Teague expressed his admiration for the Mexican worker's ability to withstand "the high temperatures of the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys."<sup>47</sup> The Santa Paula citrus grower also pointed out that white laborers refused to do farmwork because they were constitutionally (physically) unsuited to perform it. On the other hand, he concluded that Mexican workers were well adapted to field conditions.

Charles Teague was not alone in his praise. The seemingly natural ability and reputation of Mexicans as extraordinary farm workers was frequently stressed in testimony before congressional committees. C. V. Maddus, an official of the Great Western Sugar Company, also gave Mexicans high marks. He praised them for being a "God-fearing, family-loving, law-abiding set of people."<sup>48</sup> According to other employers, Mexicans were credited with the virtues of being "docile, patient,

usually orderly in camp, [and] fairly intelligent under competent [meaning Anglo] supervision.”<sup>49</sup> But the key factor for American agriculturalists and industrialists was the Mexicans’ “willingness to work for low wages.”<sup>50</sup> In reality, of course, they had no other choice.

The virtues of Mexican immigrant labor became a litany recited by industrialists as well as by agriculturalists. Bethlehem Steel President Eugene G. Grace expressed high regard for Mexican workers’ willingness “to work hard and return to their homeland when need for them has passed.”<sup>51</sup> Despite their praise of the Mexican workers’ character and traits, employers joined Mr. Grace in assuring Congress that the Mexicans were here only on a temporary basis. California grower S. Parker Frieselle vowed before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization that the civilization of California would never be built on a Mexican foundation.<sup>52</sup>

Echoing a similar sentiment, Texas Congressman John Nance Garner asserted that Mexicans had a “homing pigeon” instinct which assured their return to Mexico. Community leaders and civic groups viewed their anticipated departure as beneficial since Mexicans were considered socially and culturally inferior and therefore unsuitable for American citizenship. Some individuals cited climate as a deterring factor. Mexicans, it was averred, could not survive the cold weather of the Midwest, the Eastern seaboard, or the Pacific Northwest. Therefore, the rationale went, they would never settle permanently in the United States. This meant that Mexican Nationals could be exploited with impunity and discarded when their services were no longer required.<sup>53</sup>

The views of Eugene G. Grace, S. Parker Frieselle, and John Nance Garner were shared by Dr. George P. Clements, in charge of agricultural affairs for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. Clements was an avowed advocate of unrestricted importation of Mexican farmworkers. He advised growers and

ranchers that they should treat the Mexican well “until his term of employment is over, then return him to his home.”<sup>54</sup> Clements based his advice not on humane compassion, but on the grounds that fair treatment guaranteed farmers and growers a constant supply of dependable labor. A day laborer summarized the adverse attitude of employers toward their Mexican workers with the sage observation: “You want us as long as we are strong and well and able to do five dollars [worth of] work for three dollars; when we get sick and we can’t work [then] we get nothing but kicks.”<sup>55</sup>

Lack of understanding or appreciation of the Mexican immigrants’ vital economic role was a result of how they were perceived by the Anglo community. They were viewed primarily as an exploitable labor force imported to perform seasonal tasks. As such, they were considered as temporary rather than permanent residents. Ironically, this view was prevalent even in the Mexican community. Most Mexicans regarded themselves as being here *por sólo un poquito tiempo* (for only a little while). Many of them actually came with the hope or intent of acquiring a little nest egg and then returning to Mexico to live out their remaining years in modest comfort. The unintended length of their stay was attested to by the number and progressive ages of children born while their Mexican parents were in the United States.<sup>56</sup> Even those who had been in the United States for a long time held on to their dream despite the fact that as the years passed their hopes faded. This attitude was a very distinctive feature or characteristic of Mexican immigration. For Mexican immigrants, the mother country was always just next door.

This was especially true in the Southwest, where the proximity of the border constantly beckoned loyal sons and daughters. The umbilical cord did not have to be severed. It provided them with a sense of security and well-being. This was important, for rampant discrimination convinced them that regardless of their

status, to the Anglo community they “would always be Mexicans.” Laborer Emilio Martínez and merchant Francisco Balderrama Terrazas shared this view despite being longtime residents.<sup>57</sup> Mexicanos, therefore, preferred to retain their Mexican citizenship. Naturalization statistics underscored this fact. Applications for American citizenship were substantially below those of other immigrant groups. In 1910, 1920, and 1930, the Census Bureau reported that only 5 to 13 percent of the Mexican Nationals were American citizens. The percentages for European-born nationalities was 45 percent to 49 percent in the same period. During the Great Depression only about 2 percent of Mexican Nationals applied for citizenship.<sup>58</sup> Proud of their cultural heritage, Mexican Nationals saw no reason to pledge allegiance to a nation that viewed all Mexicans as second-class citizens. In actuality, family allegiance superseded all other ties or bonds in the Mexican community.

*Al Norte: Documents*

*Visit to Sugar Beet Fields. Detroit Consul Ygnacio Batista to Secretary of Foreign Relations, 20 August 1930.*

Source: Mexico City, Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores,  
IV-76-49.

[seal of Mexican consulate]

Consulate of Mexico

Re: Inspection of [sugar] beet fields.

Detroit, Michigan, August 20, 1930.

Honorable Secretary of

State.—México, D.F.

In conformance with the authorization which your Authority was so kind as to grant me through our Consulate General in New York, Friday the 15th instant, at six o'clock in the morning, I left this city to begin my tour of inspection through the sugar-beet fields, heeding the invitation which the Michigan Sugar Company had extended in this regard. The results of my observations during this trip are the following report, which I hereby offer to you.

The tour occupied last Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, that is the 15th, 16th, and 17th of the present month, and the person who accompanied me was Mr. Lucío Ramírez, of Mexican nationality, who for a number of years offered his services, in various capacities, to the above-mentioned company at its plant in Alma, Mich., and who, at the present time, carries out the functions of Contracting Agent of the company in Detroit, employed in contracting workers from Mexico and other countries.

In Gratiot, Saginaw, Lapier, Clinton, and Tuscola counties is located the most important nucleus of plantations of the afore-mentioned enterprise, in which it has

established five sugar plants, in the following towns: Caro, Sebewaing, Bay City, Saginaw, and Alma. I visited the plantations and the plants, speaking at length with the administrators of the latter, to whom I suggested the appropriateness of dealing through the Consulate with whatever difficulties might arise with the Mexican workers, offering them amicable mediation, which they accepted, agreeing that many of the aforesaid difficulties develop and become ever more arduous to resolve due to the ignorance of our countrymen with respect to the language of this country.

In this interchange of impressions with the administrators regarding the situation of our countrymen in the fields of their respective jurisdictions, in general they expressed very favorable opinions as to the character and energetic work of our countrymen, and they explained in detail the manner in which are carried out the different operations of sowing, thinning, weeding, and harvest of the beets, and we discussed, finally, the reason for which a number of difficulties have presented themselves with respect to our compatriots, especially with respect to the dimensions of the plots they work, since these dimensions serve as the basis for their daily wages.

In each of the counties to which I have referred, I visited a number of Mexican families, and I was able to note that they are actually living in conditions that, while not the best that might be desired, are at least much better than the conditions of the Mexican families residing in Detroit, given that the latter, because of the critical condition of the economy of the state, which has resulted in the loss of their jobs for the great majority of the settlement, find themselves passing through a very difficult period, and their living conditions are, quite possibly, even miserable.

The company sets aside for its workers, in the fields, free housing; these houses are generally of wood, and are in very good condition, although many of them are in need of repairs, which it has not been possible to carry out, as it was explained,

the considerable losses which the Michigan Sugar company has suffered recently having prevented this; I was able to see to it during my visit, nevertheless, that the respective administrators attend immediately to the complaints which several of our countrymen presented to me regarding the lack of window panes or fire screens or chimneys, etc., which were immediately taken care of for them.

That which has most adversely affected our workers in the beet fields is the drought experienced in this region and in all of the North Central area of the United States during the present season; for, in addition to working in the beet fields, in years past they had the opportunity to work at sowing and harvesting wheat, beans, cucumbers, and corn, and the crops of the three last-mentioned products have been severely damaged this year by the aforementioned drought. Nonetheless, several families have managed to find work of this kind, which offers them a daily profit of \$2.00 per ten-hour workday, and in which almost the whole family is employed, thus encountering a considerable alleviation of the economic situation in which they find themselves.

I received only five complaints, during my tour, regarding difficulties with the dimensions and tasks assigned to the Mexicans, which were favorably resolved with respect to the interests of the latter, by means of mediation by the undersigned.

In addition to the plants that I have mentioned, there are three others, but in these the Mexican families are a minority, so that 750 families from our country work in the five aforementioned, forming approximately 40 percent of the total number of workers in the company, the remaining 60 percent being composed of Germans, Poles, Belgians, Dutch, and Russians.

I was also in the general offices of the Columbia Sugar company in Bay City, with the object of meeting the upper management and negotiating with them with regards to the complaint on the part of three of our countrymen working in their

plantations in Mount Pleasant; they heard with courtesy the aforesaid complaint, also arising from questions as to dimensions, and offered to make suitable amends to our compatriots.

In sum, the number of families which I visited in the countries I toured amounted to sixty-four, in total, having heard and transmitted to the administrators all their complaints and difficulties, and having obtained in this effort the most successful outcome possible, for I sincerely believe that this trip will serve to ensure that in the future the complaints of our workers will receive due attention from the managers of the aforementioned enterprise, who offered to collaborate with the undersigned, in the spirit of justice, in the resolution of all the problems of our compatriots.

I believe it only just to point out as an important piece of information that in spite of the fact that the sugar companies of the state of Michigan have been suffering considerable losses in recent years, because of the low price which their product commands in the marketplace, in general they fulfill their promises to our compatriots and manage to satisfy them; although it is certain that this results in benefit to themselves, since they understand very well that the employment of Mexican braceros is indispensable for the harvest of their crops.

Another of the matters which was presented to me as a real problem during my tour, and one which is very difficult to resolve, is the fact that, according to the complaints of our countrymen, this year a very limited assignment was given them, awarding them a very limited expanse of ground to work; this, let me repeat, would be very difficult to resolve, since due to the present excess work force, arising from the enormous number of people who find themselves unemployed, the crops were sown simultaneously in the various regions, and it has been necessary to carry out the work almost at the same time, eliminating in this way the recourse of past

years, which consisted in finishing one task and beginning another additional one in a different field.

Although the harvests of corn, cucumbers, and beans, I repeat, were severely adversely affected by the drought, it appears that the harvest of sugar beets, which are in very good condition, will be one of the best of the last five years, for which in that respect our compatriots will obtain a good profit at harvest time.

In general the conditions under which our farm laborer works in the fields which I visited are as follows: the wage which is paid for hilling and thinning is \$10.00 per acre; for weeding (generally two weedings are needed per season), \$3.00; and for the harvest, \$10.00 per acre. All tasks involved in the production of sugar beets are paid, then, per acre of land worked. When they receive extra work—in the aforementioned crops of corn, beans, etc.—they are paid per ten-hour workday, at the rate of \$2.00 per day, or \$.25 per hour.

I was able to ascertain, in addition, that the difficulties which present themselves with respect to dimensions are due in almost all cases to the impossible situation in which our compatriots find themselves, lacking the instruments or the requisite knowledge with which to corroborate the aforesaid dimensions, it being the case moreover that almost all of them take into account the total extent of the ground, while the company's agronomists only and exclusively take into account the cultivated area, measuring it in acres of 43,560 square feet.

In concluding this brief summary of the conditions and problems of the Mexicans employed in the sugar-beet fields of the state, it remains only for me to express my certainty that in the future, with the knowledge which I have acquired of the aforesaid problems, and the good relations of amity which I have managed to establish with the upper management of the sugar enterprises, the efforts in defense of the interests of our aforementioned compatriots which this office might

undertake will be more effective, and the complaints which might be received from them more easily resolvable, in a just and equitable manner.

I cannot conclude without expressing to your Authority the sincere gratitude which all the Mexicans demonstrated toward our government, upon learning the object of my visit, and the interest which they demonstrated upon my speaking to them of the works which the revolutionary government itself is carrying out for the well-being of our country, many of them indicating themselves disposed to return to the country, as soon as they might assemble a sum in order to dedicate themselves, there, to farming, applying the knowledge of modern methods of cultivation which they have acquired during their stay in this country.

Informing you of the results of my trip, which the solid support of your Authority has made possible, let me reiterate my gratitude to you and the assurance of my very distinguished consideration.

**EFFECTIVE SUFFRAGE. NO REELECTION.**

Consul,

[signature]

cc: The Mexican Embassy in Washington and  
The consulate General in New York.

*Letter of Introduction for Genaro Torres Family by*

*Dr. Levi B. Salamans, MD. 28 October 1919.*

Source: Papers of Daniel Torres. Courtesy of Daniel Torres.

Casa de Salud, “El Buen Samaritano.”

Guanajuato, Mex., Oct. 28th, 1919.

To R.R. Conductors and others:—

The bearer of this letter is Sra. Wenceslao Torres. She has with her her three little children of 4, 8 and 10 years of age, and is going to join her husband in Portsmouth, Va., (627-629 Crawford St.). She has a railroad ticket for her self and children from San Antonio, Texas, to Portsmouth. Will all persons to whom she may need to show this letter kindly help her with changes of cars or any other needful service so that she may safely reach her destination and new American Home, and in so doing oblige not only this family, but also their many friends in the Republic of Mexico.

Most gratefully yours,

[signed] Levi B. Salamans, M.D.  
American Citizen