

Mexican Immigration History: Longer, more Complex than U.S.-Mexico border

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A group of Mexican laborers walk to board a train in Chicago, Illinois, to be deported to their native Mexico in 1951. AP Photo

The first Mexicans to become part of the United States never crossed any border. Instead, the border crossed them.

Mexicans first arrived in present-day New Mexico in 1598 and founded the city of Santa Fe in 1610. That was 10 years before English settlers landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Centuries later in 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. It then had to deal with a budding superpower: the United States.

War breaks out in 1846, U.S. gains vast territory

In 1846, war broke out between the U.S. and Mexico. In 1848 the two nations signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, giving the U.S. an enormous amount of land that used to be part of Mexico. This included what would later become the states of California and Texas, as well as parts of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Nevada. In exchange, Mexico was paid a mere \$15 million.

In 1854, the U.S. bought what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico from the Mexican government. It paid just \$10 million for the land.

By taking over Mexican territory, the U.S. expanded its size by one-third. Almost overnight, tens of thousands of Mexican citizens had become residents of the United States. They didn't move or immigrate, and they had no choice in the matter: their communities were now part of the United States.

Broken promises, violence and border ballads

Most of the Mexicans who lived in the new territories became U.S. citizens. The agreement between the U.S. and Mexico guaranteed their safety and property rights, "as if the [property] belonged to citizens of the U.S. according to the principles of the Constitution." In practice, however, these promises were not kept. By the end of the 19th century, many Mexican-Americans had their land taken and found themselves living in an often hostile region.

Still, immigrants continued to cross the border. Once in the U.S., they had to face harsh weather, an uncertain economy, and the constant threat of violence.

The Mexican-Americans overcame their situation in part through a new type of popular music - the corrido, or border ballad. Shaped by hard times and long distances, these storytelling songs were much like musical newspapers, carrying news of current events and popular legends around the border region.

Three phases of 20th century immigration

Mexican immigration in the 20th century came in three great surges. The first began in the 1900s. Revolution in Mexico and a strong U.S. economy led to a sharp increase in Mexican immigration. Between 1910 and 1930, the number of Mexican immigrants counted by the U.S. census tripled from 200,000 to 600,000. The actual number was probably far greater. El Paso, Texas, became a gateway for newly arriving immigrants, much like Ellis Island had been for European immigrants.

In the end, we can't know for certain exactly how much immigration from Mexico occurred during this period. Because of the length and openness of the U.S.-Mexican border, a great deal of immigration took place outside of legal channels. Undocumented immigrants tended to live on the margins of society and were especially easy for powerful people to take advantage of. The lack of documentation also makes it impossible for us to know exactly how great this surge of immigration really was.

As the Mexican-American community became larger, it gained more attention. National political figures began to try to win over Mexican-American voters and the entertainment business started making advertisements, plays, and popular songs with "Mexican" or "Spanish" themes. Some of these works spread stereotypes and racism, however.

Some groups saw the growing Mexican immigrant population as a problem. Efforts were made to force immigrants to learn English and adopt the norms of American culture. One school pamphlet, "Americanization through Homemaking," suggested that putting Mexican girls into sewing,



cooking and cleaning classes was the way to help them fit in.

The Depression: hard times and deportation

Then, in the 1930s, the Great Depression hit Mexican immigrants especially hard. All Americans were facing a job crisis and food shortages, but Mexicans and Mexican-Americans had to face an additional threat: deportation.

There were too few jobs and unemployment was on the rise. As a result, hostility toward immigrant workers grew, and the government began a program of sending immigrants back to Mexico. Many were either tricked or forced to make the trip. Some U.S. citizens were deported simply on suspicion of being Mexican.

All in all, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants, especially farmworkers, were sent out of the country during the 1930s. Many of them were the same workers who had been eagerly recruited a decade before.

Some managed to hang on in the United States, however, and by the end of the 1930s, they held jobs throughout the American workforce.

Railroad workers and braceros

They also helped build the region's growing railroad system. Many then used that train system to move North and East, settling in a number of American cities.

The 1940s saw yet another reversal of U.S. policies toward Mexican immigration. Many working-age men were away fighting in World War II, and farmers were desperate to find workers to replace them.

In 1942, the U.S. and Mexico jointly created a program to encourage Mexicans to come to the U.S. as contract workers called braceros. They were generally paid very low wages, and often worked under conditions that most people in the U.S. were unwilling to accept. More than 5 million Mexicans came to the U.S. as braceros, and hundreds of thousands stayed.

Just as one government program was pulling Mexican immigrants into the U.S., another was pushing them out. After the war, the U.S. began a new campaign of deportation on a much larger scale. More than 4 million immigrants, as well as many Mexican-Americans, were sent to Mexico.

Mexican-American influence grows in the U.S.

Many Mexican-American organizations became prominent in the postwar years. Perhaps the best-known Mexican-American movement was the United Farm Workers (UFW in the 1960s and 1970s). The UFW organized farmworkers nationwide and pressured employers to improve conditions for workers. These campaigns received widespread publicity, and the UFW's leader, César Chávez, gained national fame. Other activists fought for greater recognition of Mexican-



Americans. Many Mexican-Americans began to describe themselves as Chicanos and Chicanas during the civil rights era.

The third great surge in Mexican immigration is still taking place. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are currently more than 20 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S.

Mexican immigrants and their descendants occupy a more central place in American cultural life than ever before. Mexican-Americans now live in all regions of the country and can be found in most professions and trades. There are Mexican-Americans serving as high government officials, as well as local mayors, sheriffs, and school board members.

Government projections show that, by the next two generations, more than 25 percent of the U.S. population will be of Latin American origin, meaning they trace their roots to countries south of the United States in Central and South America. Latin American communities, and especially Mexicans, have been part of America's history from the beginning, and have a large role to play in its future.

