

Mexico—The Essentials



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US IMMIGRATION LAWS

US Immigration laws did not at first result in official action against Mexicans. Border enforcement against migrants was not a high priority. Initial efforts to implement immigration restrictions on the southern border began in 1904, prompted by concern over Asian immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 halted immigration for 10 years, a political reaction to the public perception of the Chinese as vice ridden, opium addicts and a racially inferior people. The law became permanent in 1902. Nevertheless, a number of Chinese evaded the restrictions by going through Mexico. President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 directed the Immigration Service to patrol the border. A mounted force of about seventy-five men based in El Paso, Texas, patrolled as far west as California. Congress in 1915 authorized the formation a group of mounted inspectors stationed at points along the border to regulate those entering the country and collect the federal head tax. Chinese exclusion still remained the major concern through World War I.

In 1917, the United States passed an Immigration Act that included a long list of those denied entry, increased the head tax, and imposed a reading requirement in any language on immigrants. For Mexicans with a high illiteracy rate, it encouraged illegal entries. Legal immigration dropped from 56,000 in 1916 to 3,100 in 1917. During the US participation in World War I (1917–1918), Secretary of Labor William Wilson exempted Mexican agricultural workers from all migration requirements until 1921. Some 72,000 crossed the border. In 1918, the United States included Mexican miners and workers needed in vital industries in the temporary lifting of all requirements. The National Origins Act of 1921 included a significant change that restricted migration based on a complex ratio of

prior immigration from various nations, excluding Asia. It exempted Mexico and the Western Hemisphere from the quota system; individuals could freely immigrate, pay the appropriate head tax, and file the necessary paperwork to obtain citizenship.

Contracts offered by employers varied in their treatment of migrants, although most workers had oral agreements usually only on wages. Labor recruiters collected their fees without concerning themselves with working conditions. Abuses, including overcharging at farm stores and racial discrimination, upset the Mexican government. The governor of Sonora and subsequent president, Plutarco Calles, attempted without success to require Arizona labor recruiters to post \$1,000 bonds for each migrant worker contracted for the cotton harvest across the border. President Venustiano Carranza in 1917 instructed the Migration Department to examine contracts to ensure that they conformed to the labor requirement of the Constitution.

US LABOR AND MEXICAN WORKERS

Both the 1917 legislation and the National Origins Act remained in force until 1965. The laws unintentionally defined the two broad categories of legal and illegal migration. Pressure began almost immediately to address illegal immigration. Much like the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic Know-Nothing crusade of the 1850s that portrayed hapless, often illiterate, Irish immigrants as a dangerous threat to US culture, some political, economic, and cultural leaders made similar charges about Mexican migrants. US labor union leaders became concerned that low wage labor in Mexico and migrants in the United States would damage their ability to press for higher wages and better working conditions. The American Federation of Labor (the AFL), year after year, passed resolutions in favor of restricting Mexican immigration as leaders worried that agricultural workers would inevitably drift into manufacturing jobs. Californian and western growers countered that Americans avoided stoop labor (work with a short-handled hoe that required kneeling) in the fields, and if growers were forced to offer higher wages they could not remain in business.

These workers caused particular worry for AFL President Samuel Gompers, who believed that only the internationalization of labor organizations could stop the use of cheap labor to drive down wages in the United States. Some unions had admitted migrants as early as 1887, when railway unions recruited Mexican workers. The unions also helped organize skilled railroad labor across the border in Nuevo Laredo, and then in Monterrey, Puebla, Aguascalientes, and Mexico City. The Western Federation of Miners (WFM), more radical than the AFL, established an international presence when it organized miners on both sides of the border. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905 wanted to create one union combining skilled, unskilled, and agricultural labor. This reflected Mexico's situation in which agricultural workers made up 64.4% of the domestic work force. The IWW's anarchist philosophy provoked hostility from oligarchs

in both the Porfirian and revolutionary regimes that matched the Red Scare of 1919–1920 in the United States. President Samuel Gompers of the AFL cooperated with the Mexican revolutionary government until his death in 1924. The new union leadership continued to send representatives to Mexican labor conferences, although the revolutionary officials took control of the union movement. Nevertheless, a general reluctance to incorporate Mexicans as US union members resulted from the view that they represented a competing group rather than individual workers. The use of Mexican strikebreakers in the 1919 steel strike did not help, and Henry Huntington of the Southern Pacific recruited strikebreakers in El Paso effectively avoiding railroad unionization.

Mexicans asserted their rights. Agricultural workers in Colorado and Wyoming organized the Alianza Hispano-Americana. In Los Angeles the Pacific Electric Railway employees organized La Union Federal Mexicana, and its 700 members went on strike. California farm workers established the Confederación de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos del Estado de California (CUCOM). The CUCOM had some success in improving conditions in the late 1930s. Unionized Mexican migrant women in the garment industry went on strike in 1933 and in the canning industry in 1939. Mexican miners had a significant presence within the United Mine Workers Union.

THE US BORDER PATROL

Congress in 1924 established the US Border Patrol. The agents supplied their saddles and horses, and the government provided the oats. Four years later they received standard uniforms. In the early 1930s, the patrol divided their responsibility between the northern and southern borders. Agents assigned to the Canadian border focused on stopping bootleggers. On the southern border, the immigration agents attempted to apprehend illegal migrants.

The Border Patrol notwithstanding, dealing with Mexican migrants fell to county and municipal officials. The economic decline following World War I left many workers unemployed and unwanted migrants destitute. The government of President Álvaro Obregón (1920–1924) had little choice but to spend over a million dollars to repatriate out-of-work migrants.

DEPRESSION-INSPIRED DEPORTATION

Although for most of the 1920s the US economy underwent recovery and migration followed, the stock market crash of 1929 and the resultant economic collapse led to massive unemployment, repatriations, and suffering. Official pressure mounted against foreign migrants, who competed for jobs and joined the relief rolls for indigent residents. Local voters opposed social services for foreigners. In 1931, the newly appointed US Secretary of Labor William N. Doak launched a campaign to open up jobs for Americans by deporting illegal foreign workers. His efforts led to the arrest of mostly the unemployed on welfare. In both the

United States and Mexico, the Depression created anti-migrant hysteria. The US government sent goodwill ambassadors to tour Latin America in an effort to reassure Latin Americans. Mexican officials, caught up in anti-migrant hysteria, deported Chinese immigrants, along with their Mexican wives. In a well-known case, they sent 400 Mexican women and their children with their husbands to China, where they became stranded, embarrassing the Mexican government. Eventually, the government financed their return and did its best to reunite families.

Los Angeles County, California, spent 2 million dollars on general relief in 1930. County officials believed the expenditure could be lowered if migrants were sent back to their native countries. If the foreigner happened to be employed, deportation would open a job for a US citizen as a replacement. Los Angeles County repatriated illegal residents of all nationalities, including over 6,000 Europeans and several thousand Canadians. Mexicans constituted an easily identifiable ethnic group. Those without legal documentation could be deported. Those legally in the country could not be forcibly expelled, but they were subjected to coercion to leave. Citizenship of the children born in the United States, even of older children who wanted to stay, received little attention. Los Angeles County's repatriation committee organized fifteen trains from 1931 to 1933 to convey 12,668 Mexicans on county relief to the border, supposedly saving \$453,000 in welfare payments.

Mexican settlements existed around the nation in Chicago, Kansas City, New Orleans, Omaha, Gary, and St. Paul. In the 1920s, Detroit had a Mexican population of 15,000 and smaller clusters existed farther east, for example in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Local governments in these communities organized repatriation committees. Soon repatriation trains departed from Pittsburgh, Gary, Detroit, Chicago, and East Coast locations, and often took more than a week to reach the Mexican border. Regularly scheduled freight and passenger trains had the right of way, leaving returnees shunted off the main track for long waits. Families at times could not travel together. Governments, in an effort to save money, sent the women and children by train and men in the back of trucks. Public funds generally paid the transportation costs, but at times former employers did. Inland Steel in Chicago offered 170 discharged Mexican employees free tickets to Laredo and the Santa Fe Railroad provided a 50% discount on fares. The repatriation, in the peak period from 1929 to 1933, sent to the border some 70,000 a year with a peak of 138,519 in 1933 tapering off by 1937 to 8,000 individuals. Some 450,000 returned to Mexico before repatriation ended.²

The sudden influx of repatriated individuals overwhelmed the facilities of Mexican border cities. Government officials required returnees to register and allowed them to bring all their possessions, including cars, trucks, animals, and farm equipment, into the country duty free, and did their best to dispatch them as soon as possible into the interior. The people of cities and towns along their route of travel did, at times, bluntly ask them to move on. Those who could returned to the villages of their birth. With limited public funding, most returnees

had to fend for themselves and most quickly exhausted what money and valuables they had. The children especially suffered. For those born and reared in the United States, Mexico was a foreign land. To Mexicans, they were foreigners, who preferred to speak English among themselves, lamented the sudden drop in their living standard and the absence of running water and sewage, and missed their American diet, including a preference for flour rather than corn tortillas. Their frame of reference was a US neighborhood, not a Mexican village. Some returnees felt they received an unfriendly reception and responded by retracing the journey to the communities that had deported them.

Despite all of the difficulties, many Mexican officials saw an opportunity to make use of the skills the migrants had learned in the United States to expand the Mexican economy. They created new experimental agricultural colonies for them. Two such colonies briefly survived. Perhaps the most interesting, designated as Colonia #2, was established at Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, in April 1933. On the surface it seemed ideal, with fertile land, plenty of water, and a sparse population. Some 400 hundred *repatriados* housed in Mexico City traveled to the colony and, shortly afterward, several hundred more joined them. Colonial administrators had laid out parcels of land and constructed palm tree huts for them. The authoritarian administrators ran the colony as if it were a penal institution, excluding its residents from all decision making and dealing harshly with ungrateful complainers. Planners ignored the difficulty of adjusting to a tropical climate. In addition, insects, from swarms of biting black flies to chiggers (microscopic biting insects that cause intense itching), mosquitoes, and an array of other tropical life forms assaulted the unprepared residents. Disease killed sixty colonists in less than a month. Of the original 500 colonists, sizable groups melted away. One group walked to Acapulco, a journey of 23 days, and arrived destitute. Municipal authorities asked them to leave. Fortunately for them, presidential candidate Lázaro Cárdenas, campaigning in the city, paid their transportation back to Mexico City. Within 8 months, the colony had a population of only eight diehards.

The only colonia to succeed resulted from the construction of the Don Martín Dam and associated irrigation canals in the north 50 miles from Laredo, Texas, transforming arid land into 148,200 acres of well-water farmland. It was not specifically established for returnees, but nevertheless attracted many.

WORLD WAR II

Recovery from the Depression occurred on the eve of World War II. Many deportees returned to the United States as the manpower demands of the war changed the situation from a surplus labor supply to worker scarcity. The rapid buildup of the armed forces from 190,000 men in 1939 to 8.5 million men and 275,000 women by 1945, required 16 million replacements to keep combat divisions at full strength (eighteen divisions suffered 100% and five suffered 80% casualties). Demand for food and material to support them and the hard-pressed

British population required total mobilization of labor. By 1943, the "Arsenal of Democracy," as the United States termed itself, each day produced 86,000 planes, 648,000 trucks, 45,000 tanks, 71 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, and a merchant or Liberty ship. US women met many, but not all, of the labor demands.

As it did in World War I, the federal government turned to Mexico to help with its military and civilian needs. An agreement with Mexico allowed the United States to draft resident Mexicans into military service as well as allowed the US Army to open recruiting stations in Mexico. At least 250,000 Mexicans served in the US Armed Forces. As early as 1942, one California grower warned that the fall harvest required 40,000 to 100,000 Mexican workers. A concerned US government quickly organized a contract labor program before the harvest.

THE BRACERO PROGRAM

The Bracero Program, created in cooperation between the Mexican and US governments, set wages and agreed on working conditions. Theoretically, violations or threats to the well-being of braceros, including racial segregation, would result in the exclusion from the program of the community responsible. Twenty-four states made use of braceros. Only Texas was excluded at first because the Mexican government objected to its record of discrimination. Almost immediately, US railways pushed for a similar agreement to provide track maintenance crews. Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Southern Pacific had made an unsuccessful request for Mexican track hands. By 1942, the military draft and the defense industry had depleted the number of railroad workers. The companies' request resulted in an agreement in May 1943. Between 1942 and 1947, 200,000 Mexican came to the United States, almost evenly divided between agricultural labor and railway workers, and earned over 205 million dollars. The Bracero Program during World War II remained relatively small, peaking at 62,000 in 1944; by the war's end some 50,000 railroad braceros worked across the country, and plans had been approved to raise that number to 70,000, if the war continued.

The process to become a bracero required an individual to have state-issued eligibility papers, travel to Mexico City, be interviewed at the National Auditorium, undergo a comprehensive physical examination, and be transported by rail to the border, where US officials required another physical examination and spraying with DDT to prevent disease. Then the officials dispatched the braceros to their jobs. The contract required braceros to agree to a 10% deduction from their paychecks to be sent to banks in Mexico as forced savings. The money disappeared and it has yet to be located, with both the US and Mexican governments blaming the other.

Once in the United States, an individual might be moved from one field to another as harvesting dictated. Mexican consular officials responded to complaints and were legally entitled to inspect living conditions, although they were

often denied access by employers. The Mexico City newspapers listed violations and braceros' complaints, although the angry government could do little more than protest. Railroad workers also encountered abuse. According to the bi-national agreement they were to be paid the prevailing company wage, but delayed pay caused resentment without any recourse. The New York Central Railroad had a reputation for unfairness and overdue payments. The US War Manpower Commission urged the NY Central, without much success, to address the complaints. At the peak of the Bracero Program, track workers made up 8,055 out of 17,751 hands and some 20% of repair shop personnel (1,452 of 5,177). The Southern Pacific absorbed 25% of railroad braceros.

Contract labor did not meet the demand for workers and jobs drew additional migrants. The growing numbers of noncontract labor verged on replacing the agricultural contact system. Migrants avoided the official programs because they objected to the indignity of the mandatory physical examination, and they wanted to sidestep the bureaucracy. Braceros learned about opportunities in the United States and how to survive in a foreign country. Moreover, because demand for labor still outpaced supply, migrants found federal officials eager to keep them in the economy. A simple procedure allowed Mexican workers without the necessary papers found on US farms to be legalized. Officials returned them to the border, issued documents making them legal, and returned them to work. No penalties existed for the worker or the employer, and during this period over 87,000 workers had their status legalized. Other illegal workers were not discovered.

The Bracero Program was supposed to end at the conclusion of the war. Nevertheless US growers succeed in extending it, but railroad companies in the face of union opposition failed to do so. In 1951, President Harry S. Truman signed legislation providing for a 2-year program similar to the original agreement that was renewed every 2 years until 1963, when public opposition resulted in its approval for only one transitional year before it ended.

NEW IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

The conflict between the demand for cheap agricultural workers and public concern about the competition with US workers prompted a US government study of the issue of Mexican migration. The President's Commission on Migratory Labor's report resulted in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 that made harboring illegal aliens a felony punishable by a \$2,000 fine and a prison term of 5 years. The growers' lobby successfully gutted the law with the inclusion of the so-called Texas Proviso that divided harboring from employing illegal aliens. Public concern continued to mount with the increase in numbers of migrants. Complaints centered on the migrants' alleged displacement of US workers, their presumed criminality, and imagined public health threats. Enforcement of laws against illegal entry reached a turning point in 1952 when the Border Patrol received the authority to search cars and trucks for illegal migrants. This resulted in some 50,000 migrants being airlifted back to Mexico.

Responding to public pressure, President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed 101 Airborne veteran, General Joseph “Jumping Joe” M. Swing as the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Swing, in spite of the opposition of powerful Texas politicians, including, Lyndon B. Johnson, launched “Operation Wetback.” The Border Patrol, assisted by municipal, county, state, and federal agencies, including the army, apprehended and claimed they deported 1.1 million migrants in 1954. Officials took those captured to either El Paso or Presidio, Texas, transported them across the border, and put them on trains to the interior, so it would be difficult for them to return. The INS also used ships to ferry deportees from Port Isabel, Texas, to Veracruz to deposit migrants at a location distant from the border. Although the INS probably exaggerated the numbers, nevertheless, the widely publicized program resulted in migrants returning home and prompted others to delay attempting entry. The high level of enforcement used in Operation Wetback could not be sustained.

The migration issue became more complicated with the unintended consequences of the Hart–Cellar Act or Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that ended nationality-based quotas. Politicians assumed that the traditional European countries that sent new settlers would continue to provide the bulk of immigrants. Immigration preference rewarded job skills needed in the United States and united individuals with family members already in the country. Unexpectedly, Asian and African immigration boomed, and in the year 2000 the volume of immigration returned to the level of 1900.

The Hart–Cellar Act did not impose a quota on Mexican immigration, although the entire hemisphere was restricted for the first time to 120,000 annually. Amendments after 1968 became progressively more restrictive, and in 1975 Latin American countries came under quotas set at 20,000 per each republic. For Mexico, this reduced legal immigration by 25%. Within 2 years, another change set a global ceiling of 290,000, which was reduced again within 2 years to 280,000.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, who certainly valued Mexican agricultural labor, and Congress ignored the emerging service-based economy that relied on unskilled and low-wage workers in restaurants, janitorial work, chicken processing, gardens, and other low-paid, but necessary, work.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and its amendments, not the end of the Bracero Program, marked the beginning of accelerated illegal Mexican migration. High demand for these workers contributed to the increased migration. These efforts against illegal entry notwithstanding, large-scale migration began in the 1970s, so that estimates of the resident Mexico-born population in the United States quickly reached 11 million and remained there through 2010. Annual border crossings jumped from 800,000 to approximately 20 million by 2010, but these statistics do not indicate how many were daily crossers working the United States and then returning home. Of the migrants coming to live in the United States, some 70% came from Mexico City, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Durango, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and the State of Mexico.