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EL NORTE

Up from Mexico

TO THE JEWISH exiles, America was "the Promised Land," and to the immigrants from Mexico, it was "El Norte."

Unlike the immigrants from Asia and Europe, Mexicans lived in a country that bordered the United States. Entry was easy. "All you had to do coming from Mexico, if you were a Mexican citizen," recalled Cleofas Calleros, who came with his family in the early 1900s, "was to report at the immigration office on the American side...give your name, the place of your birth, and where you were going to." Most of the immigrants did not even bother to report to the immigration authority. They simply walked across the shallow Rio Grande. A federal official observed: "These immigrants appear at the border in *sombrero, sarape,* and sandals, which, before crossing the river, they usually exchange for a suit of 'American' clothing, shoes, and a less conspicuous hat."[1]

Like the Japanese immigrants who were arriving about the same time, Mexicans saw America as a land of opportunity. In villages and towns where they had been born and expected to live out their lives, they welcomed their brothers and friends returning from work in the United States. A song filled their imaginations with extravagant hopes and vivid images of success:

> *If only you could see how nice*
> *the United States is;*

> *that is why the Mexicans*
> *are crazy about it.*
> *Your watch is on its chain*
> *and your scarf-pin in your tie*
> *and your pockets always filled*
> *with plenty of silver.*[2]

From El Norte, immigrants wrote to friends and relatives back home: "Come! come! come over it is good here." The news set off a chain reaction that brought "others and others." In this way, just one person coming here led to the migration of twenty-eight families from his village. "Since I was very small I had the idea of going out to know the world," Jesus Garza recalled. "As I had heard a lot about the United States it was my dream to come here."[3]

Such dreams created a tremendous pull to the north. "If anyone has any doubt about the volume of this class of immigrant," an American reporter wrote in 1914, "a visit to South Texas would reveal the situation. In a day's journey by automobile through that region one passes hundreds of Mexicans, all journeying northward on foot, on burroback and in primitive two-wheel carts. They are so numerous as to almost fill the highways and byways. When questioned many of them will tell you that they fled from Mexico to escape starvation. In a great number of instances the refugees have friends or relatives in this country who have told them of the wealth and prosperity of the wonderful *ESTADOS UNIDOS*."[4]

Mexicans were also pushed from their homeland. Large landholders and speculators had been expropriating small farms and uprooting rural families. An 1883 land law allowed private land-development companies to receive up to one-third of any land they surveyed and subdivided. Forced to become tenant farmers and sharecroppers, the peasants had become especially vulnerable to exploitation. "The owners gave us the seeds, the animals, and the land," recalled Elias Garza after he had moved to Los Angeles, "but it turned out that when the crop was harvested there wasn't anything left for us even if we had worked very hard. That was terrible. Those land owners were robbers." Migrating to cities, Mexican peasants suffered from cyclical unemployment as industries expanded and contracted. "The Mexican people, with industries dying...," Marcelo Villegas observed, "are crushed, starved, and driven out of their country."[5]

In addition to poverty, there was the danger of violence. The 1910 Mexican Revolution forced tens of thousands of refugees

to flee northward. "We were running away from the rebellion," said Jesus Moreno, who arrived in Los Angeles with his family in 1915. "There were a lot of people coming to that city [El Paso] because of the Revolution.... We came to the United States to wait out the conclusion of the Revolution. We thought it would be over in a few months." These political refugees had planned to return to Mexico. "I would rather cut my throat before changing my Mexican nationality," explained Carlos Ibanez. "I am only waiting until conditions get better, until there is absolute peace before I go back." But the waiting stretched into years and years. "Of course I have never thought of changing my citizenship," sighed Fernando Sanchez in the 1920s, "but the truth is that I don't know when I will go back to Mexico for things are getting worse there day by day on account of the revolutions."[6]

And so Mexicans went northward in search of safety and work. "We left Durango because work was very scarce," Pedro Villamil recalled, "and we were told that one could get good money in the United States and there was work for whoever wanted it." An immigrant construction worker in Santa Barbara explained: "Where I came from I used to work ten hours for $1.25.... Then I came here and they paid $1.25 for eight hours—it was good." "It is only natural," the Mexican newspaper *El Paso del Norte* commented, "that the 'Supreme Law of Necessity' obliges all these people to emigrate to a foreign land in search of higher wages." A contemporary reported that there was a "steady drift of labor from south to north," drawn by American wages two to three times higher than wages in Mexico. Carlos Ibanez explained he was paid so little for his labor in Zacatecas that he did not "even remember how much it was." So he decided to leave Mexico "in search of fortune" in California.[7]

What accelerated the movement of Mexicans to the United States was the development of transportation: in 1895, the Mexican International Railroad had extended a line nine hundred miles into Mexico, linking the Texas border town of Eagle Pass with Durango. The railroad triggered a mass migration. "There is not a day in which passenger trains do not leave for the border, full of Mexican men who are going in gangs to work on railroad lines in the United States," reported a Mexican newspaper in 1904. "Each week five or six trains are run from Laredo," the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1916, "carrying Mexicans who have been employed by labor agents, and similar shipments are being made from other border points."[8]

Traveling by rail overnight, the migrants traversed great geographical as well as cultural distances. One of their songs told what it felt like to cross the border by train:

The fleeting engine
Can't do anything good
Because at dusk it is at home
And at dawn in a strange country.[9]

When they woke up, they found themselves far from familiar sights and sounds. A somberness swept over them as they wondered what crossing the border would mean for them.

Most of the immigrants were from the agricultural labor class, and they were predominantly young—between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. They included women: either a man brought his family with him, or he migrated first to find a job and a place to live and then sent for his family. Between 1900 and 1930, the Mexican population in the Southwest grew from an estimated 375,000 to 1,160,000, the majority of them born in Mexico. The new immigrants settled in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, and spread as far away as Michigan and Illinois.[10] As the migrants crossed the border, they sang:

Good-bye, my beloved country,
now I am going away....
I go to the United States
to seek to earn a living.
Good-bye, my beloved land;
I bear you in my heart.[11]

Sprinkling the Fields with the Sweat of Their Brows

During the early twentieth century, Mexicans were enticed across the border because their labor was needed. "I have had to work very hard where I have found work," said one of them, "whether it was on the railroad, in the cotton fields or beet fields, in the hotels as a waiter, as an elevator man, or in the asphalt." Indeed, Mexicans worked in a wide range of jobs.[12]

A rural people in Mexico, many of the newcomers became urban industrial workers in America. "In southern California and in Texas," a researcher found in 1908, "Mexicans do most of the excavating and road building, and are otherwise employed on

public works." In 1928, a Texas official estimated that Mexicans represented about 75 percent of all construction labor in the state. Mexicans were hired mainly as manual laborers. White labor unions jealously protected the skilled jobs by creating a two-tiered labor market that reflected a racial division. "I have gone from one place to another working as a laborer," Policarpo Castro said in the 1920s, "for I haven't found anything else because the masons' union don't want to admit Mexicans.... But although I have worked as a laborer I have always tried to learn everything that I could. I have worked in cement, in a brick-yard, laying pipes...and have learned all that sort of work, even how to make entrances and walks for a garage with an incline. All that will do me some good in Mexico.... I know that if I want to amount to something in any work I will have to do it there in Mexico, because the Americans only despise us." A Mexican bluntly explained why he was not able to be a carpenter: "They [whites] wouldn't let me on account of my race—discrimination."[13]

In Los Angeles, 70 percent of the Mexicans were unskilled blue-collar workers in 1918, compared to only 6 percent for Anglos. "In...many communities," a journalist observed in 1929, "it is the Mexicans who do the common labor. In fact, we have imported them for that very purpose." In El Paso, only 5 percent of the Mexicans were in professional and managerial occupations in 1920, compared to 30 percent of the Anglos. "There were no Mexican men or women, boys or girls, working in the banks," Cleofas Calleros recalled. "American offices, like insurance offices...they never hired Mexicans." Most workers were locked into low blue-collar occupations. Mexican heads of households living in Santa Barbara in 1900, for example, were still employed in the same jobs thirty years later.[14]

The urban Mexican workforce included women, employed in garment factories, food processing plants, and canneries. Working in the canneries was especially punishing. A "harsh cannery whistle" shattered the "air at midnight" or the "frozen black hours of the near dawn" to rouse the workers from their beds. Then they rushed to the cannery as they buttoned their clothes, their "teeth chattering all the way." Inside the cannery, they felt the cold of the salt wind as they cut the heads and guts from the sardines. The fish kept coming down the chute, and they had to work faster and faster. Finally, the "silver stream" stopped flowing, and they went home tired, splattered with fish blood. But they had some money to buy food and pay the rent.[15]

In the Midwest and East, Mexicans worked in steel mills, packing houses, and automobile assembly plants. In the Southwest, they found employment in the railroad companies. "[They] are not subject to agitators," a labor supplier stated. "They're not organized. They're peaceable...and will work on the desert or anywhere the Santa Fe wants to put them." The chief engineer of the Santa Fe Railroad commented: "The Mexican cannot be driven like the Negro, but anyone who knows how to manage the Mexicans can get more work out of them than any other class." A federal official listed the reasons why Mexicans made good railroad workers: "As a laborer the Mexican immigrant is said to be unambitious, physically not strong, and somewhat [indigent] and irregular, but against this is put the fact that he is docile, patient, orderly in camp, fairly intelligent under competent supervision, obedient, and cheap. His strongest point with the employers is his willingness to work for a low wage."[16]

Most Mexicans, however, worked in agriculture. In California, farmers turned increasingly to Mexican labor as immigration laws such as the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement and the 1924 Immigration Act excluded Asian labor. "We have no Chinamen; we have not the Japs," farmers argued. "The Hindu is worthless; the Filipino is nothing, and the white man will not do the work." "Due to their crouching and bending habits," claimed Dr. George Clements of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce's Agricultural Department, the "oriental and Mexican" were suited to tasks in the fields, while whites were "physically unable to adapt" themselves to such work. A cotton grower in California's Imperial Valley declared that the farmers needed Mexicans as stoop laborers: "We mean to get Mexicans for the work and get all we need." By the 1920s, at least three-fourths of California's two hundred thousand farm laborers were Mexican.[17]

Mexican agricultural laborers also became indispensable in Texas. The state employment service estimated that of the three hundred thousand full-time migrant workers in the state, 10 percent were Anglo, 5 percent black, and 85 percent Mexican. An official of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce declared: "Yes, sir, we are dependent on the Mexican farm-labor supply, and we know it. Mexican farm-labor is rapidly proving the making of this State." A newspaper described the widespread agricultural employment of Mexicans: "To meet the demand agents have been sent across the border into Mexico. Many of those [recruited Mexican workers] going into the cotton fields of Texas are accompanied by their entire families. This is to the liking of the planters,

for it is maintained that children as a rule will pick as much cotton as the grown-ups." Texas farmers repeatedly offered similar explanations for the widespread employment of Mexicans: "The white people won't do the work and they won't live as the Mexicans do on beans and tortillas and in one room shacks." "Whites cannot be as easily domineered, led, or directed as the Mexicans." "I prefer Mexican labor to other classes of labor. It is more humble and you get more for your money." "No other class we could bring to Texas could take his place. He's a natural farm laborer."[18]

But there was nothing natural about doing backbreaking work. Rosaura Valdez described how much work it took to pick a hundred pounds of cotton: "I'd have a twelve foot sack, about this wide. I'd tie the sack around my waist and the sack would go between my legs and I'd go on the cotton row, picking cotton and just putting it in there. So when we finally got it filled real good then we would pick up the sack, toss it up on our shoulders, and then I would walk, put it up there on the scale and have it weighed, put in back on my shoulder, climb up a ladder on a wagon and empty that sack in."[19]

Farm work was seasonal and migratory, with laborers following the crops. "Each family traveling on its own, they came in trucks piled with household goods or packed in the secondhand *fotingos* [travel-worn Fords] and chevees. The trucks and cars were ancient models, fresh out of a used-car lot, with license tags of many states." Where they would be living at any given time was determined by where the jobs were. "We went to Calipatria [California] and the whole family of us engaged in cotton picking," said Anastacio Torres. "They paid very well at the time. They paid us $2.00 or $1.75 for every 100 pounds of cotton which we picked and as all of the family picked we managed to make a good amount every day. When the cotton crop of 1919 was finished we went to Los Angeles and then I got a job as a laborer with a paper manufacturing company. They paid me $3.40 a day for eight hours' work. I was at that work for some time and then returned to the Imperial Valley for lemon picking."[20]

Conditions in the migrant labor camps were squalid and degrading. "Shelters were made of almost every conceivable thing—burlap, canvas, palm branches," reported a minister describing a camp in the Imperial Valley. There were no wooden floors, and chicken yards adjoined the shelters. Next to the houses was a huge pile of manure with children tumbling in it as though it were a haystack. "There were flies everywhere.... We found one woman carrying water in large milk pails from the irrigation ditch. The water was brown with mud, but we were assured that after it had been allowed to settle that it would be clear and pure.... There were no baths." The growers felt no responsibility for the housing conditions or the welfare of their workers. They thought of Mexicans as "here today and elsewhere tomorrow." Commenting on the Mexican laborers, a farmer bluntly stated: "They have finished harvesting my crops, I will kick them out on the country road. My obligation is ended."[21]

Feeling they were entitled to dignity as well as better working conditions and higher wages, Mexicans actively participated in labor struggles, especially during the Great Depression. Between 1928 and 1933, Mexican farm laborers in California had their wages cut from 35 cents to 14 cents an hour. In response, they supported strikes led by trade unions such as the Confederacion de Uniones de Obreras Mexicanas (Confederation of Mexican Labor Unions) and La Union de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial (the Imperial Valley Workers' Union). Their labor militancy contradicted and challenged stereotypes of Mexican passivity. "The growers became genuinely alarmed," reported an investigator for the California Department of Industrial Relations during one of the strikes. "Heretofore they have been accustomed to considering the Mexican workers as bovine and tractable individuals, best adapted to the climatic conditions in the Imperial Valley and therefore the most desirable workers in the valley. The organization of a union of Mexican laborers seems to have evoked in the growers an ardent wish for its earlest demise."[22]

One of the most powerful Mexican strikes occurred in 1933 when twelve thousand laborers in the San Joaquin Valley resisted wage reductions. The mostly Mexican workforce turned down the growers' wage rate of 60 cents per hundredweight of picked cotton and struck for a rate of $1.00. To break the strike, employers evicted the strikers from their camps and dumped their belongings on the highway; they also used the local police to arrest the strike leaders and disrupt the picket lines. "We protect our farmers here in Kern County," a deputy sheriff told an interviewer. "They are our best people. They are always with us. They keep the country going. They put us here and they can put us out again, so we serve them. But the Mexicans are trash. They have no standard of living. We herd them like pigs." The local media also joined the attack on the strikers. "If the strike continues, it is more than likely that every last one of you will be gathered into

one huge bull pen," a newspaper threatened. "Many of you don't know how the United States government can run a concentration camp.... Do you want to face the bull pen? Do you want to be deported to Mexico?"[23]

Mexican strikers refused to be intimidated. Striking women were particularly active: they posted picket lines daily, the older women in rebozos (shawls) and the younger women wearing flapper styles. They urged the strikebreakers to support their struggle. "Don't be sell outs!" they shouted. "Join the strike. We also have to eat and we also have family." Lydia Ramos experienced a tremendous sense of solidarity: "We didn't know what union it was or who was organizing or nothing. We just knew that there was a strike and that *we* were not going to break a strike." Asked why not, she answered: "Well, we believe in justice. So I want everything that's good for me and I want everything that's good for somebody else. Not just for them...but equality and justice. If you're going to break somebody's strike, that's just going against your beliefs." In the end, the strikers won a compromise wage rate of 75 cents per hundredweight.[24]

The strikes reflected a deep discontent in El Norte. One of the strikers, Juan Berzunzolo, had come here in 1908 and worked on the tracks of the Southern Pacific and in the beet fields of Colorado. "I have left the best of my life and my strength here," he said, "sprinkling with the sweat of my brow the fields and factories of these gringos."[25]

Tortillas and Rotis: Mixed Marriages

Sprinkling the fields with the sweat of their brows alongside Mexican workers were immigrants from India. At the beginning of the twentieth century, workers from the Punjab region of India began arriving on the West Coast. By 1920, some sixty-four hundred had entered the United States. Most of them were Sikhs. Their religion of Sikhism had been founded in the sixteenth century by Guru Nanak in his effort to unite Muslims and all castes of Hindus. Wearing their traditional headdress, the newcomers were described as "the tide of turbans." "Always the turban remains," a witness wrote, "the badge and symbol of their native land, their native customs and religion." Picking fruit in the orchards of California, the men with their twisted white turbans were seen as "an exotic thing in the western landscape."[26]

The Indian immigrants had been farmers or farm laborers in

the Punjab: 80 percent came from the "Jat," or farmer caste. After the 1882 Exclusion Act prohibited the entry of Chinese workers and the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement cut off the supply of Japanese labor, growers turned to Asian Indians along with Mexicans, to reduce the labor shortage.[27]

Like the Mexican laborers, the Sikhs followed the harvesting of the different crops. The "turbaned" workers "were continually on the wing," reported Annette Thackwell Johnson for the *Independent* magazine in 1922, "coming from the melon and cotton fields in the Imperial Valley, en route to the fig orchards and vineyards of Fresno, or the rice fields near Sacramento." Farm work was one of constant movement. "During the grape picking season great numbers of them are in Fresno County," a Stockton lawyer said. "At the time of rice harvesting there will be about a thousand of them near Willows; during the cotton season in Imperial Valley (this being when the weather is very hot), they go to that place for work." The workday was long and the work backbreaking. "We got up at half past three," said a Sikh, "and before the first faint daylight was visible we were ready for work. Periodically the boss—an American foreman—would come into the fields and yell, 'Hurry up! Hurry up!'"[28]

The Sikh farm laborers constituted a community without women. In 1914, women represented only 00.24 percent of the 5,000 Asian Indians in California. Very few Asian Indian women emigrated, and after the enactment of the 1917 exclusion law, men with wives in India could not bring them to the United States. The men thought about returning to India and bringing their wives back. "I knew that if I went back to India to join her, we would never be allowed to come back to the United States," said Bagga Singh Sunga of El Centro. "If we had our women here," said a fellow countryman, "our whole life would be different."[29]

Anti-miscegenation laws had prohibited Punjabi men from marrying white women, so many of them married Mexicans. In central California, 76 percent of the Sikhs had Mexican wives, most of them twelve to twenty years younger. They had met each other while working in the fields and orchards and developed relationships leading to marriage.

Love was not the only reason why Sikhs married Mexican women. Most of them had been farmers in India, and they wanted to become farmers in California. But the Alien Land Act of 1913 had prohibited landownership to "aliens ineligible to naturalized citizenship," and Asian Indians were not "white." Sikhs discovered that they

could own land through their Mexican wives. Lohar Bupara married Teresa, a Mexican immigrant, and purchased land for farming near Delano under her name. Inder Singh, a farmer in the Imperial Valley, told an interviewer in 1924: "Two years ago I married a Mexican woman and through her I am able to secure land for farming. Your land law can't get rid of me now; I am going to stay." Many Sikh-Mexican marriages involved sisters: one sister would marry an Asian Indian man and then introduce her sister to a friend of her husband. Mir Dad, for example, married Susana Lopez in 1924. He had met her while visiting his friend Mir Alam Khan, the husband of Susana's younger sister, Maria. Similarly, Moola Singh married Maria La Tocharia in 1932, then her sister Julia married Mota Singh and another sister, Hortencia, married Natha Singh. Their marriages to Mexican women were generally not accepted by their families in India. "It used to be that our folks in India objected to such marriages," said Sucha Singh in 1924. He himself had not written to his family about his marriage to a Mexican. "I suppose others have told them about it, but I do not care even if they should be 'sour' about it."[30]

In these Sikh-Mexican families, cultural traditions were often melded. Foods, for example, were interchanged—tortillas for rotis or jalapeños for Punjabi chili peppers. Languages were also mixed together. The Mexican wives generally understood some Punjabi, but the children spoke English and Spanish in the home. Punjabi fathers learned to speak Spanish. The children were usually given Spanish first names like Armando, Jose, and Rudolfo. A few of the sons had Indian names, but they went by Spanish names or nicknames. Mexican mothers told an interviewer: "Gurbachen? Oh, you mean Bacho," and "Kishen? That's Domingo." Lohar and Teresa Bupara named their three children Sarjit, Oscar, and Ana Luisa. The oldest, Sarjit, spoke Spanish, English, and Punjabi. The children were baptized Catholic and were raised under the *compadrazgo* (godparents) system of the Spanish culture and the Catholic Church.[31]

On the Other Side of the Tracks

Included as laborers, Mexicans were excluded from Anglo society. They knew that public buildings were considered "Anglo territory" and that they were permitted to shop in the Anglo business section of town only on Saturdays. They could patronize Anglo cafés, but only at the counter or for carry-out service. "A group of us Mexicans who were well dressed once went to a restaurant in Amarillo," complained Wenceslao Iglesias in the 1920s, "and they told us that if we wanted to eat we should go to the special department where it said 'For Colored People.' I told my friend that I would rather die from starvation than to humiliate myself before the Americans by eating with the Negroes." At sunset, Mexicans had to retreat to their barrios on the other side of the tracks from where the Anglos lived.[32]

In the morning, Mexican parents sent their children to segregated schools. "There would be a revolution in the community if the Mexicans wanted to come to the white schools," an educator said. "Sentiment is bitterly against it. It is based on racial inferiority." The wife of an Anglo ranch manager in Texas put it this way: "Let him [the Mexican] have as good an education but still let him know he is not as good as a white man. God did not intend him to be; He would have made them white if He had." For many Anglos, Mexicans also represented a threat to their daughters. "Why don't we let the Mexicans come to the white school?" an Anglo sharecropper angrily declared. "Because a damned greaser is not fit to sit side of a white girl."[33]

In the segregated schools, Mexican children were trained to become obedient workers. Like the sugar planters in Hawaii who wanted to keep the American-born generation of Japanese on the plantations, Anglo farmers in Texas wanted the schools to help reproduce the labor force. "If every [Mexican] child has a high school education," beet sugar growers asked, "who will labor?" A farmer in Texas explained: "If I wanted a man I would want one of the more ignorant ones.... Educated Mexicans are the hardest to handle.... It is all right to educate them no higher than we educate them here in these little towns. I will be frank. They would make more desirable citizens if they would stop about the seventh grade."[34]

Serving the interests of the growers, Anglo educators were preparing Mexican children to follow in the footsteps of their parents. "It isn't a matter of what is the best way to handle the education here to make citizens of them," a school trustee in Texas stated frankly. "It is politics." School policy was influenced by the needs of the local growers, he elaborated. "We don't need skilled or white-collared Mexicans. The farmers are not interested in educating Mexicans. They know that then they can get better wages and conditions." A Texas superintendent explained why schools should not educate Mexican children: "You have doubtless

heard that ignorance is bliss; it seems that it is so when one has to transplant onions. If a man has very much sense or education either, he is not going to stick to this kind of work. So you see it is up to the white population to keep the Mexican on his knees in an onion patch."[35]

"The Mexican children almost don't receive any education," Alonso Galvan complained to an interviewer in the 1920s. "They are taught hardly anything at the schools to which the Mexican children go, and I have heard many teachers, farmers and members of a School Board say, 'What do the Mexicans want to study for when they won't be needed as lawyers? They should be taught to be good; they are needed for cotton picking and work on the railroads.'" A student remembered his sixth-grade teacher advising him not to continue his education and attend high school. "Your people are here to dig ditches," the teacher said, "to do pick and shovel work. I don't think any of you should plan to go to high school."[36]

There were, however, some teachers who tried to give Mexican children a sense of dignity and self-respect. Ernesto Galarza recalled how his school principal "Miss Hopley and her teachers never let us forget why we were at Lincoln; for those who were alien, to become good Americans; for those who were so born, to accept the rest of us." In his school, Americanization did not mean "scrubbing away" what made them Mexican. "No one was ever scolded or punished for speaking in his native tongue on the playground." The teachers tried to pronounce their Spanish names. "Becoming a proud American," Galarza said, "did not mean feeling ashamed of being a Mexican."[37]

Mexican parents wanted their children to have an education in order to get better opportunities and jobs than they had. Isidro Osorio, who had worked on the railroad and in agriculture, described his hope for his children's future: "What I know is that I have worked very hard to earn my $4.00 a day, and that I am an ignorant laborer, but that is why I want to give a little schooling to my children so that they won't stay like I am and can earn more so that they won't have to kill themselves working." Similarly, Jesus Mendizabal told sociologist Manuel Gamio in the 1920s: "I have three children now; they are quite large and they are all going to school. One of them helps me a little now working during vacations and at times when he doesn't go to school. I pray to God that He may give me life to go on working, for I would rather die than take them out of school. I want them to amount to something, to learn all that they can, since I didn't learn anything." A boy explained why his parents emphasized the importance of education: "They want me to go to school so that I won't have to work beets."[38]

Beginning in the 1920s, however, Mexicans found that they were not wanted to work in the beet fields or even to stay in America. In 1924, legally admitted Mexicans totaled 87,648—equal to 45 percent of the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. This large share reflected the fact that the National Origins Act limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe but did not apply to nations in the Western Hemisphere.

This dramatic change in the racial composition of immigration set off nativist alarms. To many Anglos, this new influx represented an invasion, its magnitude so large that it seemed to threaten "a reconquest of the Southwest." In an obvious reference to Mexicans as a racially mixed group, Madison Grant warned: "From the racial point of view, it is not logical to limit the number of Europeans while we throw the country open without limitation to Negroes, Indians, and half-breeds." Besides entering the country in great numbers, Mexicans were increasing rapidly in numbers because of their high birthrate. The danger was Mexican fecundity, C. M. Goethe declared. "The average American family has three children," he calculated. "Mexican laborers average between nine and ten children to the family. At the three-child rate a couple would have twenty-seven great-grandchildren. At the nine-child rate 729 would be produced. Twenty-seven American children and 729 hybrids or Amerinds!" Another nativist charged that Mexican men constituted a miscegenationist threat to white racial purity: "If the time ever comes when men with a small fraction of colored blood can readily find mates among white women, the gates would be thrown open to a final radical race mixture of the whole population." In a petition to Congress sent in 1927, thirty-four prominent educators demanded the preservation of the nation's genetic purity by including Mexico in the national origins quota system. One of the signatories was A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University.[39]

Mexican immigration also seemed to be endangering America's cultural identity. Vanderbilt University economics professor Roy Garis urged white Americans to guard against the "Mexicanization" of the Southwest. The region should be the "future home for millions of the white race" rather than the "dumping ground for the human hordes of poverty striken peon Indians of

Mexico." The benefits derived from the "restriction of European and the exclusion of Oriental immigration" should not be nullified by allowing Mexican immigration to create a "race problem" that would "dwarf the negro problem of the South," destroying all that was "worthwhile" in "our white civilization."[40]

Mainstream magazines and newspapers joined the hysterical denunciation of racial and ethnic diversity, aiming barbs at Mexican immigrants. "The simple truth is that the dilution of the people and the institutions of this country has already gone too far," the *Saturday Evening Post* editorialized in March 1930. "The country is groping, must grope, toward more rather than less homogeneity. With the Mexicans already here, with the as yet unassimilated immigrants from certain European countries, and finally with the vast and growing negro population, we already have an almost superhuman task to bring about requisite national unity. We are under no obligation to continue to make this country an asylum for the Mexican peon, and we should not do so." Two months later, the *New York Times* echoed this call for the restriction of Mexican immigration: "It is folly to pretend that the more recently arrived Mexicans, who are largely of Indian blood, can be absorbed and incorporated into the American race."[41]

The demand for Mexican exclusion resonated among Anglo workers. Viewing Mexicans as a competitive labor force, they clamored for the closing of the border. In 1910, the American Federation of Labor's *Advocate* asked: "Is it a pretty sight to see men, brawny American men with callouses on their hands and empty stomachs—sitting idly on benches in the plaza, while slim-legged peons with tortillas in their stomachs, work in the tall building across the way? Do you prefer the name Fernandez, alien, to the name, James, citizen, on your payroll?" Five years later, the *Advocate* again denounced the employment of Mexicans as cheap laborers: "True Americans do not want or advocate the importation of any people who cannot be absorbed into full citizenship, who cannot eventually be raised to our highest social standard."[42] Clearly, race was being used as a weapon by the American Federation of Labor: Mexicans not only constituted "cheap labor" but were regarded as incapable of becoming fully American.

Then came the Great Depression. Rendered superfluous as laborers and blamed for white unemployment, Mexicans became the targets of repatriation programs. Hungry Mexicans were sometimes granted temporary relief by welfare agencies only if they promised to return to Mexico. "Many Mexican immigrants

are returning to Mexico under a sense of pressure," reported sociologist Emory Bogardus in 1933. "They fear that all welfare aid will be withdrawn if they do not accept the offer to take them out of our country."[43]

In their repatriation efforts, private charities and government agencies provided railroad transportation for tens of thousands of Mexicans to their "homeland." In Santa Barbara, Mexicans were literally shipped out from the Southern Pacific depot. "They [the immigration officials] put all the people... in boxcars instead of inside the trains," a witness recalled. "They sent a lot of people from around here too.... A big exodus.... They were in here illegally but the moral part of it, like separation and putting them in boxcars.... I'll never forget as long as I live." Many of the "repatriates" were children who had been born in the United States. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce estimated that 60 percent of the "repatriated" children were American citizens "without very much hope of ever coming back into the United States." Altogether about 400,000 Mexicans were "repatriated."[44]

The Barrio: A Mexican-American World

For many Mexicans, the border was only an imaginary line between Mexico and the United States—one that could be crossed and recrossed at will. Living in El Norte, they created a Mexican-American world called the barrio.

In their ethnic enclaves located in cities and rural towns, they did not feel like aliens in a foreign land as they did whenever they crossed the railroad tracks and ventured uptown into the Anglo world. Though their neighborhood was a slum, a concentration of shacks and dilapidated houses, without sidewalks or even paved streets, the barrio was home to its residents. The people had come from different places in Mexico and had been here for different lengths of time, but together they formed "the *colonia mexicana*." "We came to know families from Chihuahua, Sonora, Jalisco, and Durango," remembered one of them. "Some had come to the United States even before the revolution, living in Texas before migrating to California. Like ourselves, our Mexican neighbors had come this far moving step by step, working and waiting."[45] Originally from different parts of Mexico, they were inventing a new identity: they were becoming Mexican American.

In their communities, the newcomers celebrated national holidays like the Sixteenth of September, Mexican Independence

Day. "We are Mexicans," declared a speaker at one of the celebrations, "almost all of us here... by our fathers or ancestors, although we are now under a neighboring nation's flag to which we owe respect. Notwithstanding, this respect does not prevent us from remembering our Mexican anniversary." The celebrations, Ernesto Galarza recalled, "stirred everyone in the barrio" and gave them the feeling that they were "still Mexicans." At these festive occasions, there were parades in the plazas attended by city and county officials as well as Mexican consuls. The entire town became a fandango. Colorful musicians strolled, and people danced in the streets. Excited crowds shouted "viva Mexico" and sang Mexican songs as fireworks exploded and muchachos (kids) listened to stories about Mexico told by the *viejitos* (old ones). Bands played the national anthems of both countries. The flags and the colors of the United States and Mexico were displayed together—red, white, and blue as well as red, white, and green.[46]

Their religion was a uniquely Mexican version of Catholicism, a blending of a faith brought from the Old World and beliefs that had been in the New World for thousands of years before Columbus. For the Mexicans, God was deeply personal, caring for each of them through their saints. In their homes, they decorated their altars with *santitos,* images of saints dear to them. They had a special relationship with the Virgen de Guadalupe: according to their account, she had appeared to a poor Indian in Mexico. "I have with me an amulet which my mother gave to me before dying," a Mexican told an interviewer. "This amulet has the Virgin of Guadalupe on it and it is she who always protects me." Their Virgin Mary was Mexican: many paintings and statues represented her as dark in complexion.[47]

What bound the people together was not only ethnicity but also class. "We were all poor," a Mexican said, "we were all in the same situation." The barrio was a "grapevine of job information." A frequently heard word was *trabajo* (work), and "the community was divided in two—the many who were looking for it and the few who had it to offer." Field hands, railroad workers, cannery workers, construction laborers, and maids came back to the barrio after work to tell one another where the jobs were and how much they were paid and what the food and living quarters were like.[48]

In the colony, unskilled workers from Mexico were welcomed. "These Mexicans are hired on this side of the Rio Grande by agents of the larger farms, and are shipped in car load lots, with windows and doors locked, to their destination," a local newspaper reported. "After the cotton season the majority will work their way back to the border and into Mexico." But the barrio offered these migrant workers a place to stay north of the border. "Beds and meals, if the newcomers had no money at all, were provided—in one way or another—on trust, until they found jobs." Aid was given freely, for everyone knew what it meant to be in need. "It was not charity or social welfare," Ernesto Galarza explained, "but something my mother called *asistencia,* a helping given and received on trust, to be repaid because those who had given it were themselves in need of what they had given. [Newcomers] who had found work on farms or in railroad camps came back to pay us a few dollars for *asistencia* we had provided weeks or months before."[49]

People helped each other, for survival depended on solidarity and mutual assistance. For example, Bonifacio Ortega had dislocated his arm while working in Los Angeles. "I was laid up and had to be in the hospital about three months," he recalled. "Fortunately my countrymen helped me a lot, for those who were working got something together every Saturday and took it to me at the hospital for whatever I needed. They also visited me and made me presents." Ortega's arm healed, and he returned to work at a brickyard. "We help one another, we fellow countrymen. We are almost all from the same town or from the nearby farms. The wife of one of the countrymen died the other day and we got enough money together to buy a coffin and enough so that he could go and take the body to Jalisco."[50]

Moreover, "the *colonia mexicana*" was a place where Mexicans could feel at home in simple, day-to-day ways. Women wearing rebozos were seen everywhere, just like in Mexico. There were Mexican plays and *carpas*—acrobats and traveling sideshows. Stands and cafés offered tamales and other favorites such as frijoles, tortillas, *menudo* (tripe stew), and *dulces* made with *piloncillo* (Mexican sugar). Cantinas and bars were places to hang out and drink beer. *Mercados* (grocery stores) stocked Mexican foods like chorizo (sausage), while *panderias* baked fresh bread. Shopping in the *tiendas* (small shops) was familiar. "In the secondhand shops, where the barrio people sold and bought furniture and clothing, there were Mexican clerks who knew the Mexican ways of making a sale."[51]

In the early evenings, as the sun began to set, the people sat outside their homes, as they had in villages on the other side of the border. The air still carried the smells of suppertime—"tortillas

baking, beans boiling, chile roasting, coffee steaming, and kerosene stenching." The men "squatted on the ground, hunched against the wall of the house and smoked. The women and the girls... put away the kitchen things, the *candiles* turned down to save kerosene. They listened to the tales of the day if the men were in a talking mood." They spoke in two languages—"Spanish and with gestures."[52]

As darkness descended, men and women shared stories about life in El Norte. "They [Anglos] would rant at public meetings and declare that this was an American country and the Mexicans ought to be run out." "You can't forget those things [acts of discrimination]. You try to forget because you should forgive and forget, but there is still a pain in there that another human being could do that to you." "I haven't wanted to, nor do I want to learn English, for I am not thinking of living in this country all my life. I don't even like it here." "They talk to us about becoming citizens, but if we become citizens we are still Mexicans. They look at our hair, and listen to our speech and call us Mexicans." "I have always had and now have my home in El Paso, but I shall never change my [Mexican] citizenship in spite of the fact that [here] I have greater opportunities and protection." "I want to go back to Leon because it is my country and I love Mexico. But I like it better here for one can work more satisfactory. No one interferes with one and one doesn't have to fear that there will be or won't be revolutions."[53] Their stories did the telling: despite their complaints about racism in America and their attachments to Mexico, they were in fact making El Norte their homeland.

As the night air became chilly, the barrio people pulled their serapes and rebozos around their shoulders, and their hunched figures blended into the darkness. But no one was sleepy yet, so the people continued to sit in front of their homes. The stars were brighter above Mexico, someone commented, and there were more of them. *Si,* yes, another added, and there were coyotes howling nearby. As in their old villages, the streets in the barrio had no lights, and now only their voices could be heard. "When they pulled on their cigarettes, they made ruby dots in the dark, as if they were putting periods in the low-toned conversation."[54]