

6. Elisa Silva Describes Mexican Immigrant Life in Los Angeles, 1920s

My father died. Then my mother, my two sisters and I decided to come to the United States. As we had been told that there were good opportunities for earning money in Los Angeles, working as extras in the movies and in other ways, we sold our belongings and with the little which our father had left us we came to this place. . . . From the time we entered I noticed a change in everything, in customs, and so forth. . . . When we got to Los Angeles we rented a furnished apartment. . . . My sisters and I decided to look for work at once. One of my sisters

“Elisa Silva,” in Manuel Gamio, *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*, 1971, pp. 159–161.
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... found work at once in the house of a Mexican woman doing sewing. My mother then decided ... that I should also work in order to help out with the household expenses. ... I found it hard to find work, much as I looked. As we had to earn something, a girl friend of mine, ... from Sonora, [Mexico,] advised me to go to a dance-hall. After consulting with my mother and my sisters I decided to come and work here every night dancing. My work consists of dancing as much as I can with everyone who comes. At the beginning I didn't like this work because I had to dance with anyone, but I have finally gotten used to it and now I don't care, because I do it in order to earn my living. Generally I manage to make from \$20.00 to \$30.00 a week, for we get half of what is charged for each dance. Each dance is worth ten cents so that if I dance, for example, fifty dances in a night I earn \$2.50. Since the dances are short, ten cents being charged for just going around the ball-room, one can dance as many as a hundred. It all depends on how many men come who want to dance. Besides there are some who will give you a present of a dollar or two. This work is what suits me best for I don't need to know any English here. ... At times I get a desire to look for another job, because I get very tired. One has to come at 7.30 in the evening and one goes at 12.30, and sometimes at 1 in the morning. One leaves almost dead on Saturdays because many Mexican people come from the nearby towns and they dance and dance with one all night. In Mexico this work might perhaps not be considered respectable, but I don't lose anything here by doing it. It is true that some men at times make propositions to me which are insulting, but everything is fixed by just telling them no. If they insist one can have them taken out of the hall by the police.

 E S S A Y S

The demand for labor during and after World War I, combined with the passage of immigration laws that stopped the flow of European labor and favored the Mexicans, facilitated Mexican migration to the Midwest. This was a process based on family and kinship networks. Zaragosa Vargas, an associate professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writes in the first essay that the expanding production of beet sugar in the Great Lakes region would extend Mexican migratory work patterns to the north. Repair and maintenance work for eastern railroads, along with jobs in meatpacking houses, steel mills, and automobile companies, brought thousands of Mexicans to the industrial heartland of the Midwest during the 1920s.

During this period, urbanization had a great impact on Mexican immigrants, who assimilated to American culture in varying degrees. Material acculturation among young Mexican American women, who were particularly influenced by the material culture that surrounded them, is the subject of the essay by Vicki L. Ruiz, professor of history at Arizona State University, Tempe. She notes that not only was this aspect of Americanization never fully achieved, but Mexican identity was never completely undermined by the material acculturation that did occur because the Mexican values of the immigrants remained dominant. Pageants, festivals, and music that dramatized their Mexican heritage further reinforced the immigrants' culture.