

Mexican Immigration to the United States 1880-1980: an Overview

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With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, the United States acquired roughly half of Mexico's northern territory, and approximately 75,000 Mexicans inhabiting the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Southern Colorado were granted automatic United States citizenship. The treaty bonded the two countries in an asymmetrical relationship the ramifications of which extend to the present moment. This history of imperialism and contiguity—the two countries share a 2,000-mile border—cannot be ignored when studying the virtually uninterrupted northbound migrant flow that for over a century has cemented further the frequently troubled, sometimes felicitous, relationship between Mexico and the United States. However it alone does not tell the whole story. In their important study of Mexican communities that send immigrants to the United States, Douglas Massey, Durand, and Gonzales remind us that material conditions cannot be overlooked when exploring Mexican immigration:

There are several important lessons to be learned from this brief history of migration from four Mexican communities. The first lesson is that contemporary out-migration from Mexico is rooted in the same causes as the great European migrations of the past century. Both reflect the inevitable dislocation brought by industrialization and development. As industrialization spread throughout the world, it stimulated successive waves of emigration from different countries (Thomas 1954, Hicks 1969; Reynolds 1980; Baletic 1982). As land is consolidated, as machines are substituted for human labor, and as scientific methods are applied to increase agricultural productivity, people are displaced from traditional livelihoods.(1987, 108)

Displacement caused by industrialization indeed launched Mexican migration to the United States, but this irrevocable phenomenon is also owed to conditions of advanced development in the United States and its attendant demand for cheap labor.

Economic landscape and immigration law in the Southwestern United States, 1880-1924

The completion of a transcontinental railroad linked the two coasts of the United States and played a major role in integrating the Southwest into the nation's industrial

economy. In the 1880s, the Southwestern United States entered an intensive phase of economic expansion based on a triangular configuration comprising railroad, agriculture, and mining industries. Mines had existed in the Southwest since the presence of Colonial Spain, but by the turn of the nineteenth century production had shifted from precious metals to industrial materials (Cardoso, Corwin 1978). The creation of markets for western fruits and vegetables by the transcontinental railroad, the development of refrigeration, and the Newlands Reclamation Act, which provided federal funds for large-scale irrigation and reclamation projects, added agriculture as a gainful commercial venture (Taylor 1937; Gomez-Quiñones 1980). Given the scant population that inhabited the vast U.S. western landscapes that once were part of Northern Mexico, immigrant labor was crucial to the development of this economic trio.

In 1870, 2,000 Chinese immigrants arrived monthly in California and they quickly formed the backbone of the railroad and agricultural industries (Guerrin-Gonzales 1994). By 1880 complaints regarding the competition for jobs between Chinese immigrants and white settlers prompted congressional action. Racialized arguments regarding the inferiority and inassimilable nature of Chinese immigrants were central to a discourse that contributed to curtailment of Chinese immigration in 1882 (Takaki 1993). Those who remained working on farms led numerous strikes for better wages. Soon they were seen as an undesirable work force, so growers turned to Japanese immigrants to fill their need for low-wage workers. Like the Chinese, Japanese workers exhibited a high level of labor militancy and, furthermore, they became quite successful at acquiring and running their own farms, thus competing with white growers for workers (Guerin-Gonzales 1994). As it did in the case of Chinese immigration, the U.S. government responded to pressures to restrict Japanese immigration by signing The Gentleman's Agreement with Japan. This agreement put an end to the immigration of Japanese laborers until 1954, though the wives and relatives of those already here were allowed to enter the country (Takaki 1993).¹

Anti-immigrant hysteria fueled by World War I and stoked by capricious racialized rhetoric led to enactment of the Immigration Act of 1917. This act restricted European immigration, required a literacy test for males over 16, raised the head tax for all immigrants to \$8.00, and included a contract labor clause (Reisler 1976; Kisser and Kisser 1979; Scruggs 1988; Driscoll 1999). These measures coupled with the Great War in Europe reduced

considerably the European-origin labor force in steel mills, meat packing, food processing plants and opened the door to increasing numbers of Mexican workers who, given the tumultuous conditions in Mexico, were only too happy to take advantage of the opportunity to find wage labor, not only in Western states but in the Midwest as well.

As the number of workers from China, Japan, and Europe dwindled, U.S. private labor contractors “who used a variety of coercive measures to recruit Mexican laborers and deliver them to jobs north of the border” (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002, 27) turned south in pursuit of a new labor pool. Said recruitment was carried out despite the fact that the United States had, in 1885, enacted an Alien Contract Labor Law, which prevented employers from importing “cheap foreign labor.”² Mexico had its own labor contract laws designed to protect its workers from international contractors; but these too were disregarded and abuses abounded. In fact, as the Mexican government struggled to stabilize its political base and to consolidate an economy crippled by a decade of civil war, the United States sabotaged Mexico’s efforts to keep its labor force (to which, despite its good intentions, Mexico could ill afford to guarantee a living wage) at home by manipulating U.S. immigration law in such a way that encouraged emigration from Mexico and guaranteed a pool of cheap labor for the American Southwest and beyond. In fact, during the First World War, the U.S. government itself became involved in recruitment programs (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002).

This pattern was, and is, typical of the ad hoc application of immigration law to the inevitable flow of migration from Mexico to the United States during the course of the twentieth century. The Immigration Act of 1917 is a case in point. Immediately after its enactment, 1771 illiterate Mexican’s withdrew their applications and another 5745 were turned away for not paying the \$8.00 head tax (Rissler 1976). Faced with a labor shortage created by World War I and the new immigration law, agriculturalists in California and Texas mounted a campaign that convinced the federal government to waive the literacy test and the head tax for Mexican immigrants.³ It is certain that many workers had been ignoring this law by simply crossing without visas, but there is no doubt that the new measure severely affected Mexican migration. For example, Driscoll (1999) reports that legal immigration dropped from 56,000 in 1916 to 3,100 in 1917.⁴ However, under the auspices of the Ninth Proviso, the acquisition of a visa was guaranteed for Mexican nationals willing to work in agriculture. In 1918, the waiver was extended to include railroad, mining, and

construction workers. Depending on who is doing the counting, 72,000 (Guerin-Gonzales 1994) or more than 80,000 (Scruggs 1988) Mexican workers were imported under the Ninth Proviso. This temporary emergency labor program, called “the first Bracero Program” by Driscoll (1999),⁵ included some built-in bureaucratic procedures such as a job description, declaration of wages, coverage of housing and sanitary conditions, partial withholding of salary to be paid at end of contract. But in effect, there were no controls and workers moved freely from job to job undermining the original intent (Kiser and Kiser 1979). Reisler (1977) reports that after much conflict between growers and the Labor Department over the restrictions and regulations of the agreement, most were gradually lifted.

Alarmed by the exodus of workers, nationalists who saw emigration as a threat to Mexican development launched a propaganda campaign decrying the treatment of Mexican workers in the United States. Charges of racial discrimination, lower wages paid to Mexican workers, and unfair treatment by police were broadcast widely in consular reports and newspapers as fair warning (Cardoso 1979). In short, emigrants were told they would fare miserably should they choose to go to the United States. In addition, the Mexican government encouraged state officials to not issue passports to those seeking to leave the country and required inspectors on the Mexican side of the border to prevent the exit of workers not in possession of formal contracts. Nonetheless, the latter “did not choose to enforce the policy or the government workers themselves were collaborating with *enganchadores* [contractors]” (Driscoll 1999, 44).⁶ Ironically, as thousands of workers were brought in through waivers related to the 1917 Immigration Act, the post-war recession of 1921 forced 100,000 jobless workers already in the United State but who were not part of the emergency labor program to return to Mexico. The repatriations were facilitated by the Mexican government, which allocated about one million dollars to help Mexican nationals return to their country. Reisler (1977) notes that during this period public sentiment against Mexicans escalated such that many acts of violence were committed against them including the beating of hundreds of families in labor camps by ‘night riders.’

While the program was designed as a war emergency measure, when the war drew to an end, a very strong agriculture lobby—particularly vocal on the part of Texas cotton farmers and the prolific U.S. beet sugar industry—advocated for an open border, claiming unavailability of a viable domestic labor force. Hence the program was extended until 1921

and further extensions were subsequently granted (Scruggs 1988). Simultaneously, opposition to the program intensified, particularly from labor unions, which feared that Mexican labor would undermine American worker rights and wages. There were as well concerns regarding the availability of jobs for returning servicemen. Hence the program was terminated in 1922 (Kiser and Kiser 1979). Growers, however, were able to keep literate workers who, given the stipulations of the Ninth Proviso should have returned to their homeland, simply by paying their head tax (Reisler 1977).

The Johnson Immigration Bill of 1924 sponsored by the honorary president of the Eugenics Research Association (*The New Yorker* 3-8-2004), likewise attests to the ambivalence of U.S. immigration law when it comes Mexican labor. In that year, nativist propaganda aimed at further stemming the entry of Eastern and Southern Europeans led the Immigration Bureau to reduce further—quotas had been set in 1921 at 3% of nations already present in the United States—the number of entries from all countries save those in the Western hemisphere.⁷ In his assessment of this immigration bill, Gómez-Quiñones (1981) states that in reducing the number of immigrants to be admitted lawmakers acted in response to concerns regarding racial and ethnic balance within the United States society. If this indeed was the case, it begs the question, why were the populations of Mexico and Latin America, composed as they are primarily of *mestizo*⁸ populations, not included in the quota act? While racialization indeed was crucial in the construction of the nation-state and in setting the parameters of international immigration to this country, it also is true that the social construction of race does not occur independently of political or economic motives. When the United States acquired tens of thousands of mestizo Mexicans through conquest in 1948, declaring their racial status as “white” was crucial to the intended incorporation of these new citizens whose civil rights were guaranteed by treaty. This action set the precedent of treating subsequent Mexican immigrants as white also. Their *de jure* status as whites notwithstanding, the *de facto* status of Mexicans historically has been that of a racialized ethnic minority (Foley 1997) leading to no small amount of confusion, contradiction and, as we shall presently see, trouble. This consideration however was not germane to the Johnson Immigration Act of 1924. Simply put, these enactments did not apply to the Western Hemisphere employers of Mexican labor due to the pressures exerted by employers. (Bustamente 1981, Scruggs 1988).

The Border Patrol was established the same year that the Johnson Immigration act, sometimes called the National Origins Quota Act, was passed. The enactment of this measure meant that the U. S. government, for the first time, set about defending the border against illegal entry through the use of physical control, though this new approach served primarily a symbolic function (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002). Designed to curb overland immigration, it only increased the activity of extralegal recruitment and smuggling of workers, already a well-entrenched method of bringing Mexican labor to the United States which gave rise to the “wetback industry” of the 1920s (Cardoso and Corwin 1978). While the establishment of a physical controlling force at the border and concomitant efforts by the Immigration Patrol to enforce its mission were ostensibly manifestations of the country’s determination to deal with illegal entry, the history of abject failure of the Border Patrol is likewise a sign of the arbitrary nature of the application of U.S. immigration law vis-à-vis its closest southern neighbor. The Imperial Valley incident of 1926 attests to this fact. Increasing Immigration Patrol raids carried out in that area after 1924 infuriated California growers. In 1926 they leaned on the Labor Department to issue a “gentlemen’s agreement,” the provisions of which granted some 6,500 undocumented Mexican workers and their families legal status. Subsequently, the Mexican consul in the area charged that many workers had been coerced into paying the legalization fees. In Washington, perturbed Texas Congressman John Box raised his voice loudly to allege that the Labor Department was subverting the nation’s immigration laws (Reisler 1977). This ad-hoc administration of immigration law did not end here; it has in fact continued to be practiced well into the present historical moment; its primary tenet has been: “now we need them, let them stay; now we don’t, send them back.”

Mexico 1880-1920: The Price of Modernization

Modernization for Mexico began under the thirty-year rule of the President Porfirio Díaz. Under his *pan o palo* (bread or club) leadership, Mexico enjoyed political stability and entered a phase of intensive economic development. Díaz’ liberal politics encouraged foreign investment and fomented the rise of a small, elite, native bourgeoisie (Balderrama 1995). The majority, however, did not fare so well. Communal lands held by independent towns and Indian villages were allocated to individuals, speculators, and other

investors (Guerin-Gonzales 1994, 27). These lands increasingly fell into the hands of a reduced number of *hacendados*. Galarza (1965) cites a glaring example of this phenomenon: The Terraza family owned one hacienda in Encinillas that covered over 1,200,000 acres and another of more than 850,000 acres. By 1910, 95% of the rural households had become landless (Corwin and Cardoso 1978). The displaced population had no choice but to work on the haciendas under conditions of patriarchal peonage or to hit the road in search of wage labor. Moreover, between 1880 and 1910, more than 15,000 miles of track was laid in Mexico connecting its most important production centers to the United States. American investment and the ensuing rapid development of the railroad industry displaced large numbers of workers who relied on pack-mule transportation for a living, and they too joined the internal migration stream. Ironically, the development of the railroad increased opportunities for mobility among the newly displaced populations (Massey et al. 1987), many of which rode the trains northward hoping to find work. The railroads themselves hired many of these migrants as the scarcity of local labor was insufficient to meet their needs (Clark 1974).⁹ The mining industry, operating in Northern Mexico well before the presence of railroads, was transformed by the arrival of the latter and it too had to import workers from the south, a relatively easy thing to do given that wages in both industries were considerably higher than in other industries. This northward-bound internal migration was the first step in a process of stage migration that in due course would bring many of these itinerant workers to the United States.¹⁰

In addition to the mobile landless workers, two other important groups were to form the foundation of emigration from Mexico to the United States (Corwin and Cardoso 1978). Throughout the desert landscape of the Northern Mexico there were scattered *rancherías* inhabited by a people of “a subculture containing many vestigial characteristics of pre-agricultural tribes which had remained on the margins of the economy—often [becoming] squatter ‘camps’ near missions, mines, haciendas, plantations, railway junctions, and cities...Out of the *rancherías* and squatter camps of Sonora came many of the first migratory workers in the Anglo borderlands...” (Corwin and Cardoso 1978, 43). The third group to make up the first wave of immigration to the United States consisted of owners of small ranches in northern Mexico who frequently took jobs on this side of the border in order to

enlarge their landholdings and to acquire capital for purchasing equipment or animals through a form a tenancy that existed in the borderlands (Corwin and Cardoso 1978).

The economic shift from an agrarian economy to a more industrial one was accompanied by a 50% population growth in Mexico (Guerin-Gonzales 1994). Moreover, the miserable lot of the landless workers was exacerbated as mechanization of agriculture encouraged the production of cash crops for exportation, causing the price of basic staples to soar. All of these factors created tremendous hardships for the Mexican people rapidly creating a migratory labor sector, the numbers of which were to explode in the second decade of the twentieth century.

By 1910 “the structural limitations of the Porfirian political economy had reached a breaking point, and revolt spread throughout the country” (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002, 30). The violence and chaos unleashed by the armed uprising against the thirty-year dictator, and subsequently sustained through a power struggle among various factions that lasted until 1920, added hundreds of thousands to the already existing sector of itinerant workers. Galarza portrays their exodus in vivid metaphorical language: “Preceding, accompanying and following the revolution emigration was at first a trickle, then a stream and finally almost a torrent” (1965 13). Entire families fleeing their war-torn country were met at the border by labor contractors who promised not only jobs, but also outfitted them with provisions, clothing, and other material articles (Clark 1974), at dear a price, of course. As the situation at entry depots such as El Paso became critical, public and private agencies like the Red Cross and Protestant missions provided relief service for the poverty stricken families, and in this manner they helped “subsidize the migrant labor cycle” (Corwin and Cardoso 1978, 52). Historians estimate that 10% of Mexico’s population made its way north during this decade, burgeoning the ranks of a cheap labor pool that was to maintain the railways of the West and Midwest, build the agricultural empires of California and Texas, do the dangerous work of the mining industry of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah, and take up the slack created in Midwestern industrial plants by the restriction of European immigration.

The decade that followed brought a new wave of violence to Mexico as Catholics rebelled against the repressive constitutional measures of the post-revolutionary government against the church. In response to the 1926 Cristero Revolt, villages were plundered and burned and thousands of people were put in concentration camps (Guerin-Gonzales 1994).

As in the revolution of 1910, thousands of Mexicans avoided persecution by heading to the United States where, as already they had heard from relatives and friends who had been there during World War I, jobs were plentiful and wages sufficient to support a family.

The Beat Goes On: 1925-1942

The greed for cheap Mexican labor was well entrenched by the time the Border Patrol was established in 1924. Gomez-Quiñones' observation regarding the latter action is instructive:

[It] marked a dramatic change in the situation of the Mexican worker. His status changed from being one among many immigrant workers whose entry without an official visa would be incidental, to that of a fugitive of the law who had to systematically hide in order not to be apprehended and sent back to Mexico. Thus, the concept and condition of an 'illegal worker' was introduced into the relations of labor. This modified the pattern of interaction between the worker and his employer and between the worker and his community. The division between legal and 'illegal' worker and legal and 'illegal' Mexican became increasingly operationalized from the thirties to the seventies. The fear of being 'caught,' apprehended, or reported presented one more dimension to the disadvantage of the Mexican worker. (1980, 25).

Despite the vulnerable position of undocumented Mexican immigrants after the creation of the Border Patrol, so long as there were jobs on this side, they took their chances and continued to cross the border. Their resolve was strengthened by the fact that in the United States they were able to gain roughly six times the wages earned for the same work in Mexico (Gamio 1930). The common practice of using Mexican workers as scabs during labor strikes also added to the swelling ranks of workers at a time when labor militancy was particularly active in the United States. But not all went well in the promised land. Anti-immigrant sentiment was on the rise, with Mexicans becoming a favorite target for nativist hostility and bombastic racialized rhetoric. These sentiments translated into a nation-wide campaign that called for the inclusion of the Western Hemisphere in the National Origins Quota Act. Noteworthy is the fact that the quota debate escalated as Mexican labor moved into industrial work and into the Midwest:

Clearly the Labor Department was more than a little susceptible to grower lobbying and, until the late 1920s, was not loath to relax the enforcement of immigration laws in regard to Mexican agricultural workers when beset by employer complaints and cries of labor shortage. As long as Mexican laborers were safely confined to employment on southwestern farms and along desert stretches of railroad track, they were unobtrusive and largely free from attack. The movement of Mexican workers into industrial occupations in both the Midwest and Southwest, however, stimulated hostility toward Mexican immigration. (Reisler 1977, 67)

Congressman John Box from Texas led the charge in Washington. In 1929 he introduced the Box Bill, which called for quotas for Latin America and Mexico. Hearings regarding the by then proverbial “Mexican Problem” became the order of the day for the congressional agenda as social workers, educators, church leaders, journalists, and labor leaders were called to testify. In these hearings Mexicans were portrayed in the worst possible terms and, as in the case of the Chinese and Japanese before them, all their faults were attributed to their “inherent racial inferiority.” While much of the nativist discourse, particularly that found in the public media, can be interpreted as a venting of frustrations by members of the exploited working class who felt threatened by foreign labor, much of it was the opinion college professors, whose “scientific” proclamations regarding the inferiority of non-white races carried a good deal of clout in Washington. One such individual, Robert Foerster, a professor of economics at Princeton University, was commissioned by the Secretary of Labor to issue a report regarding the question at hand. In his study, Foerster (1925) concludes that in the interest of maintaining the well-being of American citizens, admission should be denied to dubious races who for several generations would reproduce prolifically thus affecting the future stock of the nation. The designers of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo agreed that Mexicans would henceforth be registered as whites—for purposes of bringing Mexicans conquered in the war of 1846 into a nation that extended full civil rights only to white individuals—but the reality of their mestizo heritage did not escape eugenicists like Foerster; and it was, the latter argued, the Indian portion of their heritage that made them inferior to whites.

The AFL was another strong proponent of quotas for Mexico, but it tried to play down the race issue by insisting also on quotas for Canada (Reisler 1977). Labor leaders,

however, were not beyond resorting to the prevailing racialized rhetoric in making their case. At a hearing before the Senate Immigration Committee in 1928, Edward H. Dowell, vice-president of the California State Federation Labor warned that mongrel populations might one day sit in the Capitol if their admission were not barred (Reisler 1977). The AFL exerted tremendous influence in this debate and over the years it was able to bring the Department of Labor into its camp, making it a major leader in the restrictionist campaign.

As one might expect, the employers of Mexican labor, primarily growers and railroad and mining representatives, vociferously opposed the application of quotas to Mexico. They repeatedly argued that there were not enough domestic workers, that Mexicans took jobs that whites didn't want, and that the restriction of Mexican labor would bring disaster to their enterprises. But did they rise to defend Mexicans against nativists attacks? To the contrary, they agreed with their opponents that Mexicans were indeed inferior to whites. In fact, they proffered that their docility as workers was a manifestation of this alleged inferiority. However, what made Mexicans an ideal reserve labor force for the United States was the fact that they were not a threat to white supremacy, quite simply because they did not settle. Mexicans, they argued, were like homing pigeons, always finding their way home (Reisler 1977; Guerin-Gonzales 1994). And those who didn't, well those who didn't could always be deported when their services were no longer needed. Herein lies the basic tenet of the historical relationship of Mexicans to American society at large, and the ad hoc application of immigration policy to Mexicans for almost a century

The executive branch repeatedly found itself torn between two very strong lobbies—labor unions and employers. In addition, there were diplomatic issues that had to be considered. Mexico understandably was disconcerted by the defamation of its people unleashed in the quota debates; consequently, the State Department, “fearful of retaliations against American investments” (Corwin 1978b, 145), steered away from extending quota limitations to Mexico and Latin America. As a calculated response to this dilemma, it chose, as it had in the past, to focus on tightening up visa standards at American consulates in Mexico,¹¹ which in turn helped curb labor recruitment. In addition, in 1929, amidst the pitched battle of the quota debates, the Registry Act was enacted. This measure gave long-time resident aliens who were admissible as immigrants the opportunity to legalize and, for the first time, it made illegal entry a misdemeanor punishable by a \$1000 fine, imprisonment

for no more than a year, or both (Corwin 1978b). The threat of fines or imprisonment had the desired effect of sending untold numbers of undocumented workers home through “voluntary” repatriation. Many, however, chose to stay and register, frequently aided by their employers. Through these measures “the Hoover administration was able to give the impression that the immediate goal of quota supporters had been achieved” (Kiser and Silverman, 1979, 54) without assuming the diplomatic dangers inherent in more severe quota legislation. Whether or not restrictionists were satisfied with the actions of the executive branch, it is certain that their racialized discourse would impact significantly the next phase of the Mexican immigration phenomenon.

Deportations and Repatriations during the Great Depression

By the end of the nineteenth twenties approximately 1.5 million first and second generation Mexicans lived north of the border (Reisler 1976). This population had just been exposed to a virulent defamation campaign that had, in the minds of the American public, rendered it an inferior race of human beings—unclean, indolent, given to vice and crime—incapable of meeting standards that defined the ideal American citizen. Furthermore, the fact that in the popular imaginary Mexicans were perceived as temporary foreign workers, reluctant to settle and always eager to return to their homeland, made them an easy target for the anger and frustration generated by the Great Depression.¹²

Spiraling unemployment figures and the concomitant growth of the public relief roles after the market crash of 1929 created a sense of urgency regarding the need to restore stability and economic security to the nation. One answer to this crisis seemed simple: rid the country of aliens who competed with legitimate Americans for jobs. Ordinary citizens, welfare agencies, patriotic groups like the American Veterans of Wars, the Lions Club, the American Legion, the America for Americans Club, and the press—most notably the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Saturday Evening Post*—urged local and federal governments to deport aliens (Kiser and Silverman 1979; Balderrama 1995). Initially the Labor Department welcomed this pressure, using it as a motive for deporting immigrants involved in labor disputes.¹³ However, the government was soon relieved of the responsibility of carrying out formal deportations.¹⁴ As public fury increased, local agencies devised tactics to ‘encourage’ immigrants to leave of their own accord.

In California, attention focused on Mexicans, the most visible group of ‘foreign aliens’. The economic crisis had hit them particularly hard, and significant numbers of them had turned to public relief in order to ward off starvation (Hoffman 1974). The City of Los Angeles devised a plan to save public money by coercing Mexicans into leaving. Tactics included spreading flyers and using the radio and newspapers to announce planned immigration raids and arrests of “prominent deportable aliens” (Guerin-Gonzales 1994, 8). County deputy sheriffs, city police, and federal immigration agents joined forces to conduct raids in Mexican *colonias* and *barrios*, frequently engaging in procedures that were not only abusive but illegal as well. Searches without warrant, detentions and arrests without just cause, and the splitting of families and couples were among the tactics used to intimidate and terrorize Mexicans and to create mass hysteria (Balderrama 1995; Kisser 1979; Guerin-Gonzales 1994). Aliens, residents, native-born citizens—distinctions were not made as newspapers spread the idea that *all* Mexicans would be deported (Hoffman 1974; Acuña 2004).¹⁵ In addition, unscrupulous individuals took advantage of the chaos caused by misinformation to wheedle property from Mexicans at prices far below fair market. It did not take long for these orchestrated scare tactics and intimidation procedures to have the desired effect; thousands of Mexican individuals and families, not only in California but in Chicago, Detroit, Gary, Indiana, Phoenix, Portland, Oklahoma City, Denver, Anchorage, and anyplace place they might live, began the exodus south (Balderrama 1995). Those who were here legally reasoned that if they left voluntarily, their return would not be barred, as it would be should they be deported.¹⁶ Public and private agencies offered assistance in the form of free transportation, and railroad and shipping companies offered half-fares and other incentives to encourage Mexicans to leave. Trains, cars, trucks, buses, ships, oil tankers, fruit boats, empty cargo steamers were used to carry Mexicans to the border, forming what the journal *Living Age* called “A Caravan of Sorrow” (*Living Age* 332, cited in Balderrama 1995). The Mexican government, while it protested vigorously the abuses involved in repatriation, and despite the fact that it was in no condition to receive large numbers of repatriates, cooperated with U. S. authorities. It also helped with expenses from the border to the interior and in some cases helped defray costs on this side of the border. The departments of transportation, customs, and sanitation in Mexico coordinated a program to help care for returnees once they crossed the border and get them to their destinations. Arrangements were made with the

Mexican National railroad to increase the access-baggage allowance for passengers traveling from the border to the interior in order to accommodate their cargo: “sewing machines, radios, typewriters, beds and mattresses, wheelchairs, books, baby carriages, bicycles, and rifles” (Guerin-Gonzales 1994, 91). Mexican consulates intervened to advise and to protect Mexican nationals from abuse, though they were told by their ambassador to not openly oppose the repatriation efforts. In Mexico, arrangements were made to assist repatriates get on their feet by placing them in agricultural colonies established by the government. Well-intentioned as they were, these efforts did not succeed because of lack of funds and because returnees themselves were “unprepared for their new lives” (Guerin-Gonzales 1994, 107).

Balderrama (1995), on the other hand, contends that repatriation became a “football game” through which opportunistic politicians were able to vent their revolutionary nationalistic ideology and their anti-American sentiments. Hoffman’s ironic tone suggests that he too did not think highly of the Mexican government’s efforts to help the repatriates: “Yet national pride and humanitarian sentiment demanded that the mother country open her heart, and her purse, to these prodigal children of La Raza. After all, *yanqui* materialism and *yanqui* capitalism had failed them, and now Mexico and its social revolution would have an opportunity to demonstrate that perhaps *la madre patria* could at least do as much for its people as the rich and powerful Colossus of the North” (1978, 236).

Understandably so, there was a sense of outrage in Mexican-American communities as well as in Mexico, where proposals were made to the government to deport 7000 Americans doing business in Mexico, to confiscate their property, and to boycott American-made goods and impose restriction tariffs. According to Balderrama (1995) these pressures were effective in decreasing the number of mass raids. Moreover, business interests in the United States were clearly alarmed by the potential economic backlash, fearing that the departure of Mexicans not on relief would create a “market vacuum” which would aggravate conditions created by the depression (Hoffman 1974). The decline in Mexican bank deposits did not go unnoticed by weary bankers. Particularly concerned were business leaders in Los Angeles who, anticipating negative press as it prepared to host the 1932 Olympics, felt compelled to write a friendship letter to the Mexican government while these repatriations were taking place (Hoffman 1974; Balderrama 1995).

Just how many Mexicans returned to their homeland during the depression? Reisler, like many other researchers, takes the uncertain approach: “Precisely how many Mexicans returned to Mexico during the depression and what percentage were pressured into departing is unknown...Estimates range as high as 400,000” (1976, 232). Balderrama’s estimates are considerably higher; he estimates one million (1995). Whatever the exact numbers, one thing is certain, according to Massey and his associates: the massive use of force and police power turned out to be a most successful strategy (2002). So successful in fact, that during the 1930s the size of the Mexican population of the United States was reduced by 41 percent (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002), and the issue of Mexican immigration was to become a low profile item on the national agenda until 1942.

The Bracero Program: An Emergency War-Time Labor Program that Wouldn’t End

With the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, the demands for food production for domestic use and for feeding U.S. and allied troops soared, prompting the United States eventually to declare agricultural commodities munitions of war (Gamboa 2000). At the same time, the escalating war industry, with its plentiful jobs and attractive wages, drew workers away from the fields to urban centers where they worked in shipyards, aircraft plants, and other supporting defense industries such as oil refining.

In 1942 President Roosevelt acknowledged that the farm labor shortage indeed presented a serious problem and, to help alleviate it, he approved legislation that granted draft exemptions to certain farm workers (Gamboa 2000). As farmers grew increasingly alarmed, it became clear to them that they would have to seek new sources of manpower. According to labor economist Ernesto Galarza the farmers decided to “draw upon the stock of labor in Mexico to meet the manpower deficit for the duration of the war, and to do so through the agencies of the Federal Government. It was a high policy choice, an emergency measure which became permanent, a sharp veer from drift to management in immigration and farm labor procurement” (1996, 45). Hence, as early as 1941 growers in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico requested permission from the Immigration office to import workers from Mexico (Craig 1971). This request, however, was to go unheeded until the following year, when the United States and Mexico entered negotiations to implement an emergency labor program, which came to be known popularly as the *Bracero Program*.

Barbara Driscoll (1995) sees this period as one of the few moments in history in which Mexico was in a position to negotiate on equal footing with the United States. Both countries had special interests and needs that could be met by wartime collaboration. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, with its tenets of non-aggression and non-intervention, had done much to encourage inter-American solidarity and set the stage for calling on Mexico to support the United States' war effort. However, she underscores the fact that despite its claims of fomenting Pan-American solidarity, this policy represented 'negotiable economic dominance' of the United States over Latin America and that central to its intent was the creation of strong economic relations that would guarantee the flow of raw materials from south to north and of goods and capital from north to south (1999, 33).

When Germany signed trade agreements with various Latin American countries, the United States became concerned about infiltration of Germany into the western hemisphere and the potential this presented for impeding the flow of raw materials needed for war production. Concurrently, Great Britain had blocked trade from Latin America to Europe. The United States saw this as an opportune moment to shore up its position vis-à-vis its southern neighbors by purchasing their surplus raw materials (Driscoll 1999). Meantime, Mexico may have seen wartime cooperation as a propitious strategy for obtaining concessions on its foreign debt and claims resulting from expropriation and nationalization of the oil industry during the period of post-revolutionary reform (Driscoll 1999; García y Griego 1996). Thus, to support the war effort of its good neighbor to the north through direct cooperation seemed to the Mexican government the right thing to do.¹⁷ Mexico became even more motivated to collaborate with the United States after Germany destroyed some of its naval vessels in the Caribbean, an event that compelled its declaration of war against the Axis powers (Driscoll 1999; Galarza 1965).¹⁸ Moreover, Mexico could ill-afford to antagonize its primary client for agricultural and mineral products (Scruggs 1988). Under these conditions then, "the development of the bracero programs during the war as a binational effort to secure Mexican labor for U.S. agriculture and railroads was entirely consistent with the thrust of U.S.-Mexican relations at the time" (Driscoll 1999, 39).

Propitious diplomatic conditions for a bilateral labor agreement notwithstanding, there was some ambivalence on Mexico's part. The long history of abuses against Mexican immigrants had prompted Mexico, as early as 1917 to provide safeguards for emigrant

workers in its constitution (Garcia y Griego 1996, 46). As Mexican views on migrant labor to the United States hardened, the government addressed problems of casual labor recruitment in its Ley de Migración of 1932, a law that included set of guidelines for international contracting of Mexican workers (Galarza 1965; Garcia y Griego 1996).

In view of the fact that these laws were habitually abused, and with the memory of the disastrous and costly repatriation of Mexicans during the Depression still fresh in its mind, the Mexican government was apprehensive regarding the conditions of recruitment and the treatment of Mexican workers should the Bracero Program be realized. There were also concerns in some circles that Mexico could not afford emigration because it created a drain on the much-needed laboring class.¹⁹ While it is true that Mexico was experiencing the “Mexican economic miracle” that which lasted from 40s to 70s (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002, 36), the favored sector of this phase of intense economic development was the urban sector. In rural areas, peasants were given land but not the resources (i.e., insecticides, fertilizers) to develop it; at the same time there was a huge rural population increase and a concomitant buildup of surplus rural labor (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002). Despite these and other pressures from various domestic constituents,²⁰ including those who claimed that emigration would harm agriculture production at home, the Mexican government was not oblivious to the fact that emigration had long served as a safety valve for the release of the country’s surplus labor.²¹

Growers in the United States were likewise cautious. Standards in farm labor had been lax and there was fear among growers that new standards would be set up for foreign workers that would become minimum government standard for domestic workers in the future, something agriculturalist were eager to avoid (Galarza 1964, 44). Furthermore, “the MFLP [Mexican Farm Labor Program] appeared to be detrimental to the best interests and the traditional independence of most farmers. Written contracts covering conditions of employment, adequate housing, and subsistence without cost during times of unemployment were not at all harmonious with the farmers’ deep-seated attitudes toward labor” (Gamboa 2000, 42). In other words, growers wanted a simpler agreement, one that waived the head and literacy tax and let workers just come on over. Growers also detested the “do gooder” mentality of the Farm Security Administration and believed they themselves were the most qualified group for administering the program because only they truly understood the

problems of farmers (Scruggs 1988). Fear aside, there were benefits to consider, chief among them the fact that the financial burden of recruitment and administration of a contractual labor program would be met by public monies; and equally important, workers brought from Mexico could not abandon the fields to search for more lucrative employment in the war industries as domestic workers were prone to do (Galarza 1964).²²

Two additional groups had reservations about the program, for similar reasons. The first was the United States Department of Labor, where the Farm Security Administration was housed. For a decade the FSA had worked to better the conditions attendant to farm labor and to raise wages. It feared that the importation of foreign workers would undermine these efforts (Gamboa, 2000). The fourth though less powerful interest group was made up of Mexican-American leaders who opposed the program on grounds that it would have a negative impact on Mexican-American workers (Scrugg 1988).

Despite practical concerns on both sides of the border, the Bracero Program would significantly serve each country's economic and political self-interests. Hence beginning in the spring of 1942 representatives from Mexico and the United States convened to negotiate a temporary agreement that would supply Mexican workers for agricultural labor in the United States. The resulting executive agreement was ratified in Mexico City on August 4, 1942. In April 1943, the agreement was extended to include railroad workers. Only the railroad program—under increasing pressure from labor—would be terminated at the end of the war as was initially intended; in areas other than the Northwest, the agriculture program would last for another two decades, “reviv[ing] traditions of migration that had largely lapsed during the depression years” (Massey et al. 1987.)

The following list contains the principal provisions of the agreement and most of the specific contract clauses as they related to agriculture labor:²³

- Mexicans contracting to work in the United States shall not be engaged in any military service.
- Mexicans entering the United States as a result of this understanding shall not suffer discriminatory acts of any kind.
- Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall enjoy the guarantees of transportation, living expenses, and repatriation established in Article 29 of Mexican Labor Law.
- Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall not be employed to displace other workers, or for the purpose of reducing rates of pay previously established.

- Contracts will be made between the employer and the worker under the supervision of the Mexican Government.
- The employer (Farm Security Administration) shall enter into a contract with the sub-employer, with a view to proper observance of the principles embodied in this understanding.
- Wages to be paid to the worker shall be the same as those paid for similar work to other agricultural laborers in the respective regions of destination; but in no case shall this wage be less than 30 cents per hour; piece rates shall be so set as to enable the workers of average ability to earn the prevailing wage.
- The worker shall be exclusively employed as an agricultural laborer.
- Workers domiciled in the migratory labor camps or at any other place of employment...shall be free to obtain articles for their personal consumption, or that of their families, wherever it is most convenient to them.
- Groups of workers admitted under this understanding shall elect their own representatives to deal with the employer. The Mexican consuls in their respective jurisdiction shall make every effort to extend all possible protection to all these workers on any questions affecting them.
- For such time as they are employed under a period equal to 75% of the period...they shall receive a subsistence allowance at the rate of \$3.00 per day.
- The respective agency of the Government of the United States shall be responsible for the safekeeping of the sums contributed by the Mexican workers toward the formation of their Rural Savings Fund, until such sums are transferred to the Mexican Agricultural Credit Bank, which shall assume responsibilities for the deposit, for their safekeeping and for the application, or in the absence of these, for their return. (Rasmussen 1951).²⁴

The strong presence of union brotherhoods in the railroad industry influenced the conditions and provisions of the railroad contract, which is considerably more sophisticated and protective of workers rights. The wage minimum, for example, was set at 47 cents.

The agricultural program was administered by several agencies from Mexico and the United States. On the Mexican side Gobernación and the DATAM (Department of Migrant Agricultural Laborers) were responsible for allocating quotas to Mexican states and for assuring that the required number of workers turned up at the recruitment arenas (García y Griego, 1996). In the United States the administrative units were the Departments of State, Justice, Agriculture, and Labor. Their task was to guarantee on-going recruitment and contract of Mexican workers. During the War the primary administrative responsibilities changed from the Department of Labor to the Department of Agriculture's War Food Administration Program, and were again turned over to the Department of Labor at the end of the war (Garcia y Griego 1996). Local administration was in the hands of the state Extension Services, which were responsible for migrant interstate labor, and job placement.

The day-to-day operations were handled by county extension agents and a farm labor advisory committee (Gamboa 2000).

Hundreds of thousands of men responded to recruitment calls for this program. González and Fernández observe that many went into debt to fund their journey to the recruitment centers in Mexico. Some sold their small plots of farmland, so desperate were they to escape the poverty of their villages (2003). At the initiating end of the recruitment process, candidates Mexico were turned over to representatives of the Department of Labor who selected those they found most fit. The latter were then turned over to the Bureau of Immigration for fingerprinting and document preparation (Gutierrez 1966). A Mexico City bracero, who joined the railroad program at the National Stadium in that city, gives a lively account in his memoirs of the actual enlistment process:

Upon entering I realized that the organization was admirable. Each form was filled out by a friendly, well-paid and flirtatious bilingual typist who in addition to working quickly, carried out here duties in a most efficient manner. There were almost forty of them behind a long counter in a large hall that had been outfitted with all the accoutrements of a proper office. Our picture was taken and by the time we left it was printed and dried....One could not ask for greater efficiency or organization from the Americans....When I passed to the far end of the hall, a young, athletic American, of a playful and jolly nature, took my right arm and yanked me with his lion-like paw. Were it not for my physical strength, which allowed me to react quickly, I would have landed on all fours and this man would have manipulated me like a puppet. He then began to feel my biceps and he checked my hands, giving signs of satisfaction. He did the same with the other men, and thus my induction into this guild of braceros took place. (Peon, 1965, 26, translation by EG-B)

Once they were given a health exam, inoculated, and processed, braceros were transported to the Mexican border. Those who were not selected—older and disabled men—frequently found themselves in dire straits if they had no resources to make the return trip to their villages (Gonzalez and Fernandez 2003). The braceros then proceeded to the U.S. side where they were matched with employers. From there they were carried by train to their destination points where they supplemented local labor made up of women, children, interstate migrants, prisoners of war, war veterans interned in hospitals, and in some

locations interned Japanese-Americans (Rasmussen 1951). Their contract was for 6 months, renewable with consent from the worker, and the two governments (Kirstein 1977).

It would be incorrect to assume that the Bracero Program, once institutionalized, functioned without serious problems or conflicts. The agricultural program was especially beset with tension and conflicts. From the beginning some growers balked and refused to participate. In Arizona, for example, cotton growers were convinced that the true intent of the program was to establish time rates for the future when they in fact preferred to pay piece rates. As a sign of protest, they forwarded a new contract to the government that included only one of the provisions of the original agreement (Scruggs 1988). Many growers especially resented the fact that recruiting was to be carried out in Mexico City, making the cost of transportation much higher than if it were carried out at the border as they preferred. When California growers testified at hearings on farm labor conditions, they complained regarding every single provision of the agreement and were especially adamant in their desire to form the rules and run the program. They stressed, however, that they wanted the Federal Government to finance the undertaking (Scruggs, 1988). These sorts of actions on the part of growers resulted, on numerous occasions, in the temporary suspension of recruitment by both governments. In fact Kirstein observes, “This cycle of suspension, negotiation, new agreement repeats itself through the alien labor program of the 1940s and 1950s” (1977, 18). Sustained diplomacy on the part of both governments throughout the war nonetheless guaranteed continuation of the program.

The most serious threat to the Bracero Program arose immediately in Texas. Growers there refused to participate in the program because they found its provisions too onerous. Instead of requesting braceros, Texas farmers met their labor needs by convincing Congress to add a clause favorable to their interests to Public Law 45 which governed the program. This clause gave the Commissioner of Immigration “authority to lift the statutory limitations on the entry of farm labor from Western Hemisphere countries when he deemed it essential to the war effort” (Scruggs 1979). The bureau of immigration subsequently authorized the entry of workers independently of the Farm Labor Emergency Program for one year, leading the Mexican government to threaten to abrogate the labor agreement (García y Griego 1996). The State Department intervened by announcing that Section 5(g) of Public Law 45 did not apply to Mexico.²⁵ However those workers who had already been issued cards remained at

their jobs in Texas. Mexico held fast in its requirement that all workers had to be brought in through the labor agreement, and to exacerbate matters it announced that, because discrimination of Mexicans was so serious in Texas, it would not authorize braceros for that state. Alarmed by these accusations, Texas Governor Coke Stevenson responded by passing the Caucasian Race Resolution, which affirmed the rights of all whites within the state to equal treatment in public places. This resolution meant nothing to most white citizens of Texas for whom Mexicans, regardless of their *de jure* status as white, were *de facto* considered people of color and consequently fair game for “Jim Crow” treatment (Montejano 1987). Governor Stevenson then made a good will tour of Mexico, formed the Good Neighbor Policy Commission, and issued a letter listing measures he would take to end discrimination against Mexicans in Texas. The Mexican Foreign Minister responded: “the governor’s program was unequal to the magnitude of the problem” (Scruggs 1979, 89). The problem was aggravated even more when reports of discrimination against railroad workers in Texas led the Mexican government to have them removed elsewhere. The Labor Department and other interested parties in Texas attempted on several occasions to convince the Mexican government to lift this ban, but Mexico was adamant about trying to force Texas to solve its problem of discrimination against Mexicans.²⁶ In the meantime, undocumented workers kept crossing the border into Texas where there were plenty of jobs.

Let us now examine briefly how workers fared in the program. In the real world of farm labor, in the fields and in the living quarters, things were not always as the official printed agreement declared they should be. Particularly in the initial stages, but also beyond, there were complaints from workers regarding wages, housing, lack of recreational and educational activities, insufficient work, and food—they especially detested sandwiches and demanded hot lunches for their noon break. Unaccustomed to the blandness of American food, they particularly missed Mexican food, and in many locations threatened to strike unless it was provided. Mexican staples were imported at some camps and at others permission was secured from the contract negotiators to allow workers to volunteer to work as cooks rather than field hands. This action help assuage the food complaints (Gamboa 2000; Scruggs 1988; Peón 1965). Housing was an enduring problem, with men unaccustomed to non-family group living had to reside in tents or barracks (Kirstein, 1977). Moreover, cold weather could present a serious problem for those dwelling in tents, and the

oil burners they used for warmth frequently caused fires in the camps. Hazardous conditions on the job were plentiful, and deaths—many unreported--frequently resulted from unsafe transportation to and from the fields (Galarza 1965; Gamboa 2000). But the most prevalent complaints pertained to non-payment of wages and insufficient work. One of the greatest scandals regarding this program surfaced a few years ago when former braceros brought forth charges that the 10% of their salaries allegedly deposited in savings accounts in Mexico for disbursement upon their return to Mexico was never paid to them. Gonzales and Fernandez (2003) suspect that these monies, which may have totaled \$150 million, went into the pockets of highly placed officials in Mexico.

In his assessment of the conditions affecting the lives of braceros, Gamboa affirms that by 1944 contractual provisions had been significantly relaxed in favor of farmers (1990, 125). In his various studies on the use of braceros in the Northwest, Gamboa cites numerous instances of discrimination and labor abuses. While these conditions indeed prevailed, we must not assume that workers were passive or ignorant of their rights. Again, Maximo Peon's account of his experiences as a railroad bracero gives an interesting participant's account regarding this point:

To bring the discussion to a close, I told them that to accompany me to see a Mr. Robinson. I told him that the boys had been involved in a just strike in Montana that lasted a half-day. [I told him] that he had just told us that we would only be working eight hours a day, which meant we would earn a miserable salary, for in fact the Railroad paid very little [I told him] that given that that was one of the petitions that had already been granted to us, we insisted once again that the State of Washington allow us to work ten hours a day. And also that we wanted, were it possible, that they set up a car outfitted with showers and some small tubs so we could bathe. That since it was the middle of winter, they should improvise a 'boiler' or stove so we could heat water in order to bathe. ... In a few days they set up car eight with well appointed showers. The 'boiler' idea turned out to be impractical given that it was impossible to heat water for so many people, so after eight day they removed it and we did not protest. But in reality it was not necessary because in each wagon there was a metal heater, that burned coal, and the braceros were able to heat water in cans. (1965, 121-22, translation by EGB)

When the war ended, a booming war economy and the ever-present fear of growers regarding future labor shortages led to the temporary suspension of the program and the use of direct employer recruitment, still under the auspices of the formal governmental administrative apparatus, albeit without the formal red tape (Calavita 1992, 2). However, the railroad program, which had imported a total of 136,090 workers, was terminated under pressure from labor unions, ending under “much bitterness and antagonism between the United State government agencies, railroad companies and organized labor” (Kirstein 1977, 33).²⁷

In the years that followed, Mexico continued to hold firm in its resolve to represent the interests of Mexican workers and to exert influence on the contractual process. Growers, on the other hand, did all they could to sabotage Mexico’s influence and to take control of the program. The U.S. government generally treaded the middle ground, mediating between domestic and international pressure groups. But as time progressed, agribusiness consolidated its power base. Arguing that the government should treat foreign and domestic labor as separate issues and stay out of the ‘motel business,’ the latter persuaded a conservative Congress, with its strong rural representation and an equally strong desire to restrain the power of organized labor, to pass a bill that gave them the upper hand (Hawley 1966, 169). Public Law 78, which was to provide the foundation for the Bracero Program for the next 13 years, was passed in 1951. In addition to stipulating that determination of prevailing wages would be the privilege of American authorities (Galarza 1966), this law authorized the Secretary of Labor to recruit Mexican farm workers, bring them to reception centers near the border, assist them in negotiating contracts, and guarantee that the contracts would be carried out by the employers. Wetbacks [sic] who had been in the United States five years or longer might also be placed under contract. (Hawley 1966, 160)

While the law included a number of restrictions and safeguards, Kirstein (1977) argues that with its enactment Mexico lost its battle to control the flow of its labor to United States. Moreover, growers and their congressional allies were successful in eliminating regulations regarding the employment of Mexican labor.²⁸ Craig, on the other hand, believes that “Of the four principal groups [growers, the U.S. government, the Mexican government,

labor] Mexico benefited most from this accord. Mexico achieved, first, a government sponsored agreement, and of the many guarantees afforded braceros, the two most important were made the direct responsibility of the United States government” (1971).

In the decade following the war, the Bracero Program was besieged by recurring conflicts and contradictions. The evolution of the program during this period attests to the following general tendencies: 1) the growing power of agricultural interests to influence policy decisions; 2) the weakening bargaining position of the Mexican government; 3) the compromised position of the U.S. government as reflected in the fact that some of its agencies promoted the interests of employers, while others attempted to uphold the integrity of the binational agreements it enacted with Mexico.

One of the most contested aspects of the post-war Bracero Program had to do with Mexico’s requirement that recruitment centers be located away from the border. As it became increasingly apparent that employers not only welcomed but also fomented illegal migration,²⁹ Mexico struggled to keep bracero applicants away from the border, clearly understanding that once lured to the border, few rejected candidates would resist the temptation to cross illegally. Furthermore, Mexican policy makers were weary of creating a labor drain from northern Mexico’s thriving agricultural economy (Galarza 1965; Craig 1971). U.S. growers, on the other hand, were loath to incur transportation costs of braceros from the interior, and they certainly were not opposed to having a reserve pool of workers available at the periphery of the onerous contractual system. The discrimination of Mexican workers also weighed heavily on the Mexican agenda. Growers seemed less concerned regarding the discrimination concerns of the Mexican government, and the United States government generally dealt with these by appeasement through lip service. Given these dynamics, the following pattern developed. Mexico would threaten to abrogate the agreement if its demands were not met. Growers, with the help of the Bureau of Immigration, would open the border for a day or two, and Mexico would find itself in a position of having to bargain. When this occurred, a compromise was generally reached. Frequently this included the practice of “drying out” illegal immigrants (Galarza 1965; Garcia y Griego 1996). This colorful term refers to the practice of certifying illegal workers; that is, of contractually converting them into braceros. All that was necessary was to have them set foot on Mexican soil, at which point they could be processed as legal braceros. This

practice was so widespread that, in 1950, 96,239 undocumented workers were “dried out” and only 19,813 individuals entered the program through formal recruitment and processing (Garcia y Griego 1996). Galarza, a strong union man, has strong words for these practices:

[It] convinced many employers who had hesitated to change over to legal hiring....The mass conversion of Wetbacks into braceros was a resourceful answer to the skeptics who feared that government was not sympathetic enough to agribusiness. The technique was worked out jointly by growers and federal officials. It solved an enormous enforcement problem for the Department of Justice. More importantly it prevented the creation of a temporary void in the labor pool which might have enabled local workers to bargain for better wages if braceros were not promptly available (1966, 64).

García y Griego is equally negative in his assessment: “In other words, after 1954 the bracero program became little more than a formally sanctioned recruitment system for the employment of ‘wetbacks’ in U.S. agriculture” (1996, 59). Gonzalez and Fernandez express a similar sentiment indicting both the United States and Mexican governments: “The United States, with the cooperation of the Mexican government, ensured a controlled, flexible, cheap, willing and easily deportable army of male laborers. Mexico acted as an international labor contractor, while the United States served as the employment agency” (2003, 106).

In 1954, the proverbial “straw” broke not the camel’s back but Mexico’s influence in the bracero project. While renewal of the binational accord was on hold, the U.S. government announced that in the meantime it would contract workers unilaterally at the border. Mexican police attempted to impede workers who flooded the gates of the American immigration port at of entry at Calexico while U.S. Border Patrol agents literally tried to pull them over!³⁰ The Mexican government deployed troops at various exit points, but upon realizing that this was quickly turning into an international incident, withdrew the troops and instructed Mexican border agents to do nothing to prevent individuals from crossing. Garcia y Griego sums up the significance of this event: the Mexican government did not have the political will or policy wherewithal to control the flow of Mexican labor and, furthermore, its moment of cooperation with the United States had come to an end (1996, 66).

While all this was going on, the Bracero Program and its attendant albatross, illegal immigration, continued to come under severe scrutiny from various fronts. Farm and trade

labor unions, the NAACP, Mexican-American groups, and religious and social reform organizations, were among the most vocal pressure groups, repeatedly calling on the government to pay attention to the horrors of what they considered 'slave labor;' and to halt the importation of foreign workers, the effects of which were detrimental to domestic farm workers. In 1950 the secretary of the National Farm Labor Union testified before the United Nations Committee on Slavery regarding the "legal and illegal forms of forced labor in the US" (Kirstein 1977, 75). In 1951 these groups were successful in convincing President Truman to establish the Presidents Commission on Migratory Labor. In addition to examining the social, economic, health and education conditions affecting migratory workers in the United States, it was to look at the problems created by importing alien workers and the extent of the impact of illegal migration on foreign workers and what needed to be done about it. Kirstein concludes that the findings of the commission were "essentially pro-labor and anti-agribusiness" (1977, 90). The press likewise turned its attention to illegal immigration, and its treatment of the issue played an important role in shaping negative public opinion regarding the 'invasion of illegal hordes' streaming in from Mexico" (García 1980, 151). The mounting pressure regarding illegal immigration led Congress, in 1952, to pass Public Law 283, which made it a felony to import or harbor illegal aliens (Craig 1971). Employers, however, were exempt from the law!

In her assessment of this period, Calavita (1992) notes that the detailed exposé *What Price Wetbacks* published in 1953 by the American G.I. Forum of Texas (an association of Mexican-American workers aligned with organized labor), and the vitriolic rhetoric of Cold War of McCarthyism, influenced significantly the national agenda regarding undocumented immigration. These pressures led to the drastic actions taken in 1954 when "the Border Patrol launched the greatest maximum peacetime offense against a highly exploited, unorganized and unstructured 'invading force' of Mexican migrants" (Samora 1971, 52). The campaign was launched with the posting of billboards with the following message: "NOTICE: The United States Needs Legal Farm Workers! The Mayor of Your Town Can Arrange for Your Contracting. WARNING: The Era of the Wetback and the Wire Cutter Has Ended! From This Day Forward Any Person Found in the United States Illegally Will be Punished by Imprisonment" (cited García 1985). These kinds of scare tactics had the immediate effect of forcing many undocumented workers to go into hiding and not report for work. In many

cases, they “were literally starved out by the Immigration Service because they were afraid to show themselves and face deportation” (García 1980, 190). Under the leadership of General Joseph May Swing, Operation Wetback, as the campaign was called, was launched. This campaign pulled together federal, state, county, municipal authorities, the FBI, the Army and the Navy, who employed aircraft, watercraft, automobiles, radio units, special task forces, and made use of public sentiment to round up and deport undocumented immigrants first in California and Arizona, then in Texas and the heartland (Samora 1971). While in California the campaign received broad support, including that of growers who were anxious to play down the growing negative publicity aimed at the Bracero Program, the case of Texas was quite different. In fact, Operation Wetback in that state was met with outright hostility from growers, the press, and ordinary citizens, particularly the Mexican-American community. Moreover, little cooperation was forthcoming from state and local officials. Border Patrol Agents were treated rudely and their every action was scrutinized for abusive practices against those being rounded up. General Swing worked hard to convince Texas growers to make use of the Bracero Program and, in order to entice them, he facilitated the process of “drying out” undocumented workers (García 1980).

Through its militarization of the border and deployment of massive rounds-ups and mop-ups, Operation Wetback was successful in reducing substantially the number of illegal workers especially along the border (Calavita 1992). So successful was Operation Wetback in discouraging illegal immigration that the number of apprehensions dropped from 1,075,168 in 1954 to 30,196 in 1959. That the Bracero Program had finally succeeded in controlling Mexican immigration is supported by the fact that at the same time that illegal immigration declined, the use of imported labor grew from 201,380 in 1953 to 437,643 in 1959 (Hawley 1966). In the process, however, Operation Wetback strained the precarious relationship between Mexican-Americans and the host society, and it allowed sectors of U.S. society to dehumanize undocumented workers by “shroud[ing] them with names and labels that reeked of derision, racism, and denigration” (García 1985, 231). Furthermore, the contradictions of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Mexican immigration are once again glaring. It was not uncommon, for example, for the INS to raid a field, to take the arrested workers across the border and deliver them to the Department of Labor, which immediately processed them

as legal braceros and sent them back to the very fields where they originally were apprehended (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002).

The changing social and political climate of the sixties was to bring an end to the Bracero Program. The rise of more liberal politics and strong coalitions of forces dedicated to social justice and the struggle for civil rights created conditions propitious for social change in the United States. It soon became apparent to the nation's leaders that the Bracero Program was one more display of this country's less than democratic practices, and it too had to go the way of racist immigration restrictions and Jim Crow laws in the South (Massey, Durand, Malone, 2002). When the 1964 agreement expired, there were no efforts made in Congress to extend the Bracero Program. Hence, it expired quietly.

It is an irrefutable fact that the Bracero Program was successful in providing agricultural employers a guaranteed pool of Mexican labor at little or no cost. In fact, by the time it ended, agricultural labor had become an arena identified with Mexican labor, and the notion that Mexican workers were indispensable because U.S. citizens were loath to do 'stoop labor' was deeply entrenched in the national imaginary. What may not have been so clear, except of course to domestic workers and organized labor, was the role this program played in keeping wages in check, in displacing Mexican Americans from agricultural labor, in impeding the improvement of working conditions in agriculture, and in inhibiting the development of agricultural labor unions (Stephen 2001). It is not accidental that the rise of the United Farm Workers Union and Cesar Chavez' effort to bring dignity and justice to farm workers in California and elsewhere coincided with the demise of this gainful—and shameful³¹—contract labor system. But perhaps the most significant effect of the Bracero Program was, as Massey and his associates conclude, that "it created a built-in structural demand for immigrant workers" (2002, 41), a demand that would expand and spill over into other areas for the next four decades, and continue, also, to replicate the contradictions that historically have inhered in the application of immigration law to the systematized flow of Mexican migration.

The Bracero Legacy 1965-1985

In a personal diary kept by an undocumented immigrant from Oaxaca, its author states:

It didn't take a lot of thinking for me to decide to make this trip. It was a matter of following the tradition of the village. One could even say that we're a village of wetbacks. A lot of people, nearly the majority, have gone, come back, and returned to the country to the north; almost all of them have held in their fingers the famous green bills that have jokingly been called 'green cards'—immigrant cards—for generations. For several decades Macuiltianguis—that's the name of my village—has been an emigrant village, and our people have spread out like the roots of tree under the earth, looking for sustenance. (Pérez 1991, 12).

These words vividly bear testimony to a legacy bequeathed to future generations by the millions of men who came to the United States as contract workers between 1942 and 1964.³² Beyond the desire among Mexican nationals to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers, the Bracero Program created a massive data bank that played no small role in fomenting migration to the United States. Never formalized, published, or appropriated by nation-states, information regarding the who, where, what, and when pertinent to migrating north, was stored in the vaults of personal experience and passed on by word of mouth to family, *compadres* (extended kin), friends, and *paisanos* (members of one's village).

The social networks through which this capital was, and still is, distributed were dense, prolific, and beneficial, because “each time a bracero departed, social capital was created among his circle of friends and relatives, and that social capital in turn reduced the costs and risks of their own international movement and increased their access to U.S. jobs” (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002,42). *What is the climate in the various states? What is the attitude of natives toward Mexicans? What are the expectations of employers? How do work habits in the United States differ from those in Mexico? How does one make a phone call? Which crops provide the best wages? Which crops should one avoid if possible? What would life be like for ones family in the United States?* Answers to these questions makes up the information store in the wealthy data bank that has provided the social capital, distributed through dense social networks, crucial to successful immigration during the last half century.

Provisioned, then, with the rich roll of social capital, Mexican workers kept trekking north despite the fact that the safety net of contractual labor was no longer available. Many of them came legally—386,000 between 1960 and 1968 (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002). However this situation would soon change. In 1968 a hemispheric cap of 120,000 was

applied and Mexicans found themselves competing with other immigrants from Latin American and the Caribbean for resident visas. The arrival of thousands of Cuban refugees in the sixties and seventies also affected the number of visas available to Mexicans. In 1976 new amendments to the Immigration and Nationality act extended a 20,000 per country limit of sponsored family members causing legal Mexican immigration to decline by 40%. The establishment of a worldwide cap of 270,000 in 1981 dropped the number of visas for Mexicans to 20,000 excluding immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. Legal entries would have plummeted, were it not for the Silva program, which resulted from a lawsuit that ordered the INS to set aside 144,946 visas formerly used for Cuban refugees for Mexicans in addition to the hemispheric ceiling. This program came to an end in 1981, and legal entries dropped to a level lower than that recorded during the 1920s (all figures are from Massey, Durand, Malone 2002). Meantime the thirst for cheap Mexican labor in the United States had certainly not been quenched. Furthermore, Mexico was experiencing a population explosion just as its 'economic miracle' had come to an end. Given the difficult situation at home, the availability of jobs in the United States, and the accumulation of social capital accrued during the Bracero Program, illegal immigration was not about to be stopped. Massey and Singer (1995) estimate that in the period between 1965 and 1986 approximately 28 million Mexicans came to the United States without visas while only 1.3 million were admitted legally and 46,000 entered with labor contracts.³³ At the same time there were 23.4 million departures, for a net gain of only 4.6 million. These figures point to "a well-regulated, highly predictable, and largely self-sustaining system based on the circular movement of undocumented male workers" (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002, 51) that worked to the benefit and advantage of both the United States and Mexico.

As the United States was undergoing an economic recession in the 1970s, public sentiment searched for a scapegoat upon which to vent its anxiety and frustration. Cornelius' take on this phenomenon is as follows: "The scenario is a familiar one in Twentieth Century U.S. history: Americans beset with rising unemployment (sometimes combined with high inflation), high taxes, and other problems over which they feel they have little control begin searching for scapegoats. The search, feeding upon residual racial prejudice as well as economic woes, leads quickly to the foreign migrant, and especially the Mexican, who is not only the most numerous but the most visible among the foreign-born population" (1978, 1-2).

As had happened numerous times in the past, illegal Mexican immigration seemed a handy culprit, and the country's leaders were put on call. Consequently, some money was funneled into the Border Patrol. It was not really sufficient to halt illegal migration, though enough to make it appear as if the border was under control. According to Massey and his colleagues (2002), this tactic produced several results; 1) it assured the persistence of a pool of low wage workers at no cost to employers since the cost of reproduction of labor was born by Mexico and the cost of transportation by the workers themselves; 2) it raised the crossing ante just enough to make migration a selective process whereby only those who were truly motivated to work dared cross, and these individuals tended to be young men, able and healthy, with clear goals in mind; that is, they came as target earners and they returned once their earning goals were met.

When undocumented immigrants were apprehended, rather than appearing for a hearing, 97% were given the option of returning voluntarily. Lawyer Joe Ortega questions the 'voluntariness' of this procedure:

The suspect is told of his right to counsel and to an administrative hearing. He is then told that if he waives these rights, he will be shipped back to Mexico without any stigma and that he will be able to reenter the country legally. On the other hand, he is told that if he demands a formal deportation hearing, he will be kept in jail until the hearing, will be found deportable, and will never be able to enter the United States again. The immigration officers assume a paternalistic, benevolent attitude toward the suspect, leading him to believe that he has committed a serious crime, but that because they are good guys they will do nothing more than give him free transportation back. They intimate dire consequences if he does not cooperate. (1979,189)

Ortega goes on to state that in 1968 179,952 aliens were sent out of the country "voluntarily" and only 9,130 were deported. Voluntary return only increases the likelihood of reentry, creating a game of "cat and mouse" (Kassoudji, 199, 169; Chavez 1992) that serves the interest of the Border Patrol. The more mice they catch the more funding they can request to help them do their job.

This, then, was the order of things on the Mexican border in the late seventies and early eighties. To the historically unsophisticated observer, things definitely seemed out of

control, and the media in this country certainly did all it could to give this impression. Once again, the words of Wayne Cornelius are instructive: “The public has been led to believe that there are so many million of them ‘here;’ that the situation is ‘out of control,’ with the outcome of the struggle for ‘containment’ uncertain. While no constructive purpose can be served by such rhetoric, a political purpose is no doubt served, and that would be consistent with a well-established historical pattern of U.S. response to Mexican migration” (1978, 13). The general feeling in this nation in 1985 was that severe measures were in order, measures designed to bring to an end a phenomenon that has been supported for a century by this country’s addiction to cheap labor and its desire, in the words of three very astute scholars, “to have its cake and eat it too” (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002, 39).

¹ Racialized anti-immigrant sentiment also prompted California to pass the Alien Land Law in 1913, which prevented aliens ineligible for citizenship—primarily non-white immigrants—from buying or leasing land for more than 3 years. Japanese families became adept at circumventing this statute by purchasing land in the name of their citizen children, relatives, or friends (Guerin-Gonzales 1994).

² In 1907 Victor Clark justifies the evasion of this law by stating, “The contract labor and immigration laws of the United States are designed to apply to seaports and to oversea immigrants, therefore their provisions are not difficult to evade, because they are so inapplicable to conditions on the Mexican border” (1974, 471).

³ The Ninth Proviso of Section Three was added to the Immigration Act of 1917. It stated: “That the Commissioner General of Immigration with the approval of the Secretary of Labor shall issues rules and prescribe conditions...to control and regulate the admission and return of other *inadmissible* [emphasis added] aliens applying for temporary admission” (Kiser and Kiser 1979, 10).

⁴ In addition to a decrease in number of applicants for visas, large numbers of Mexicans already in the United States returned home after rumors spread that Mexicans national aliens would be drafted and sent to war. According to Riesler (1977), the U.S. government launched an anti-rumor campaign to keep workers from fleeing.

⁵ Derived from the word *brazos* [arms], a *bracero* is someone who works with his arms. The closest corresponding language in English would be *field hand*.

⁶ In the face of this failure, President Cárdenas ordered his consulates to be proactive regarding the protection of Mexican workers. Cardoso (1979) reports that they did so and were particularly effective in intervening in labor disputes and in cases where Mexican nationals were being drafted because they could not produce birth certificates to prove that they were not in fact citizens of the United States.

⁷ In addition, this act required that all immigrants secure a visa from American Consuls for which they would pay a \$10.00 fee. When added to the \$8 head tax fee, this represented a hardship for Mexicans wanting to come to the United States, further encouraging entry without documents (Reisler 1977).

⁸ The term *mestizo* refers to the blend of Spanish and Indian ancestries, though currently its meaning has been broadened to include African and Asian lineages as well.

⁹ This new form of transportation was also responsible for introducing products from the United States thereby creating a taste for goods, the purchase of which required more than Mexican wages would allow. In this sense, then, the railroads added an additional incentive for emigration to the United States (Clark 1974).

¹⁰ In his thorough 1907 study, Victor Clark related the following: “A general officer of the National Railroad of Mexico stated that his company had brought north about 1,500 laborers to work on the upper section of the road within a year, and that practically all of them had ultimately crossed over into Texas” (1974, 470).

¹¹ According to Corwin, a State Department memorandum of 1928 “revealed the embarrassing fact that visa standards were decidedly lower in United States’ consular offices in Mexico than in Europe” (1978, 145).

¹² Acuña (2004) argues that Mexicans were in fact demonstrating permanency and he cites the increasing rate of home ownership as indicative of this trend. “The 1930 census showed that 18.6 percent of Mexicans in L.A.

owned homes...Home ownership did not infer moving up the economic ladder, but it suggested a state of permanency” (2004, 205).

¹³ Balderrama argues that Secretary of Labor William Doak, who was particularly virulent in his anti-immigrant stance, did the bidding of President Hoover in order to distract attention from “organized labors’ hostile attitude toward his administration” (1995, p.58).

¹⁴ Hoffman (1978) cites that the number of formal deportations from “July 1, 1931 to June 30, 1932 was only 7,116” (233).

¹⁵ Hoffman (1978) plays down the victimization of Mexicans by pointing out that the first phase of departure was “mostly self-aided and self-propelled...Here writers critical of ‘forced repatriation’ tend to overlook the fact that the greatest number of *repatriados* returned to their homeland under this form of self-help migration” (227). He also plays down the idea that many legal residents and citizens were repatriated by suggesting that those who were repatriated were most likely non-residents because Mexicans have been less prone than other groups to naturalize. He also insists, as if the citizenship of a young person counts less than that of an adult, that the majority of those counted as citizens were “under the age of fifteen” (238). Acuña (2004) asserts that U.S. born children made up 60-70 percent of the total number of repatriates.

¹⁶ Much to their dismay, when they did attempt to return, immigration laws were strictly observed and many were denied re-entry, despite the fact that they had been led to believe that if they left the United States voluntarily, they would be able to return (Guerin-Gonzales, 1994). Hoffman interprets this in a slightly different manner: “...many repatriates were not told, or did not understand, that the federal government would apply strict visa standards for any unskilled or unemployed repatriate seeking to reenter the United States” (231).

¹⁷ Mexico also contributed a limited number of combat personnel and an air base in Yucatan to the United States’ war effort (Craig 1971).

¹⁸ This happened in June 1942 when the two countries were in the process of negotiating the Mexican Farm Labor Program agreement.

¹⁹ Gamio had made this very argument in his seminal study on immigration in 1930. He also recognized that emigration resulted in significant benefits to Mexico in that returning workers brought back new skills and rural workers brought back new ideas regarding modernity. He was, however, very clear regarding the exploitation suffered by Mexican emigrants and called attention to the problem of depopulation. (1969).

²⁰ According to Craig, one of the most vocal anti-bracero constituents in Mexico was the Catholic Church, which objected on the grounds that emigration of men had a negative impact on family life and exposed men to vices such as prostitution and gambling. It also worried about contact with Protestantism, so much so that “beginning in 1953, at the behest of the Vatican, Mexican priests accompanied the migrants for the purpose of providing secular and spiritual aid” (1971, 20).

²¹ An added benefit would reveal itself with time in the form of remittances—some \$220 million between 1954 and 1959 according to Mexican statistics—sent home by braceros (cited in Craig 1971, 17).

²² Once the program was established it was not uncommon for workers to leave their assigned position either in search of better work or to return home without authorization (Galarza 1965).

²³ Scruggs (1988, 189) notes that “the Individual Work Agreement for American workers, with few minor exceptions, was identical to the bracero contract.”

²⁴ In the initial phases of negotiation the Mexican government had wanted 15 to 30 percent of the workers’ wages to be held and deposited for the workers in the Agricultural Credit Bank of Mexico. The plan was that workers could then use these funds to buy farm implements, which they had learned to use in the United States (Scruggs 1988). The amount finally agreed on was 10%. However, the bulk of these holdings were never delivered to workers. In fact, as we write this chapter, ex-braceros are camped out in front of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico city demanding payment of wages withheld from their checks with the promise of delivery upon their return to Mexico. These wages never reached workers despite the fact that they fulfilled their end of the contract.

²⁵ García y Griego adds, “What in 1944 might have boiled over as a crisis was averted by the adoption of a U.S. position that assigned a greater weight to assuring Mexico’s cooperation in keeping the program intact than to assuaging the special interests of Texas growers in getting access to labor on their own terms” (1996, 53).

²⁶ That Mexico was serious regarding discrimination is borne out by the following incident. In 1946 the Mexican government, upon receiving notice of racial discrimination and salary irregularities in the beet industry requested that braceros not be sent to Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, or Wyoming. An understanding was reached between the two governments as they “agreed that care would be

taken to safeguard the contract rights of beet workers” (Rasmussen 1951, 210). Gonzalez and Fernandez have another take on this issue arguing that “Braceros found little protection from their government, which generally went along with the wages, treatment and general conditions awaiting the laborers. Even when braceros complained to their consuls, word went out that the worker was not dependable, and grievances were swept under the rug” (2003).

²⁷ The problem had to do with the repatriation of railroad workers. Unions demanded immediate return of workers to Mexico, while the railroads tried to hold on them, employing delay tactics that infuriated the unions. The problem was compounded by lack of sufficient transportation by rail, as contracts stipulated that both railroad and agriculture workers were to be repatriated by train (Kirstein 1977).

²⁸ The El Paso incident to which Kirstein refers happened in October 16-17, 1948, when the border post at El Paso was opened to any Mexican desiring admittance. Kirstein notes that “The Associated Press reported that the United States immigration and Naturalization Service opened the border to an estimated 4,000 Mexicans and distributed them to farmers in New Mexico and Texas...” (1977, 68).

²⁹ One scholar estimates that by 1948 there were approximately 100,000 illegal workers in Texas (Kirstein 1977).

³⁰ Galarza (1966) states that at Calexico, San Ysidro and San Diego approximately 3,5000 men were signed up during this melee.

³¹ The television documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, aired in 1960, had a great deal to do with bringing the abuses of the Bracero Program to light. Massey and his associates note that “beginning in that year a coalition of unions, religious organizations, and civil rights groups began to whittle down the annual number of bracero visas, which fell from 438,000 in 1959 to 178,000 in 1964” (2002, 41).

³² Craig states that 4,216,754 contracts were issued. We must keep in mind that braceros were eligible for contract renewal, so this figure may not represent the net number of *individuals* that participated. It does, however, give us an idea of the scope of the program

³³ The continued use of contractual labor was made possible by H-2 visas. The H-2 program, established in 1943, was initially used to hire contract workers from the British West Indies and other Caribbean nations who worked the sugar fields in Florida and the East Coast. Under the provisions of IRCA the H-2 Program became the H-2A program. For a review of its use in Oregon see Brier and Niles 1998.