
BECOMING

MEXICAN

AMERICAN

Ethnicity, Culture, and
Identity in Chicano
Los Angeles, 1900–1945

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Introduction

When Zeferino Ramírez stood up in front of his fellow residents of Belvedere, an unincorporated area east of the city of Los Angeles, on June 12, 1927, he had long since been recognized as a leader among the Mexican immigrants there.¹ That Sunday night the meeting was to focus on a community crisis, and it was no surprise that Ramírez had been asked to preside over the discussion. At issue was a plan to incorporate the area into a full-fledged municipality, a move that would certainly make Mexican settlement more difficult in the district. At least three plans for incorporation had been submitted to Los Angeles County officials within the year by real estate and manufacturing interests in Belvedere. Their strategy was to increase the taxes of local residents to pay for city services, thereby forcing the largely working-class community to sell their property in a depressed market. The area in dispute could thereby be resold to middle-class Anglo-Americans, forcing up the estate values in neighboring communities and making a tidy profit for real estate companies.²

force
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Ramírez had seen this kind of discrimination before. He had come to Los Angeles during the decade of the Mexican Revolution and was unable to secure employment because of his nationality, even though he had gained valuable skills in the mines of northern Mexico and Arizona. Unable to find work, he was forced to live in an insect-infested room with fellow Mexicans. Returning to Mexico briefly to bring over his wife and children, he finally managed to save enough to return to Los Angeles and buy a small home in Belvedere. For seven years he worked as a highway laborer. In the mid-1920s, he started a business of his own, opening an undertaking establishment after serving as an apprentice in an Anglo-run mortuary. As one of Belvedere's first Mexican businessmen, he quickly earned the respect of his neighbors. Always taking pride in his Mexican nationality, he spearheaded efforts to establish a Mexican school in Belvedere.³

Yet this story was more complicated than one of ethnic leadership

against conniving Americans out to deprive Mexican residents of their land. The tensions endured by many Mexican immigrant families were exhibited in Ramírez's as well. Part of the reason he had been so active in establishing a school was that he had begun to worry when his own sons spoke English at home. Although his daughters had attended an American school and were now music teachers, he continued to prohibit them from going out alone, attending dances, or viewing American movies. His oldest daughter, however, controlled the business finances and "didn't leave much money within his reach." Ramírez himself had undergone a Protestant conversion after reaching Los Angeles, and he served as a lay preacher of a Methodist church on Brooklyn Avenue. The family's clothes and meals were largely American-style, yet they tended to decorate their home with both pictures of American subjects and patriotic Mexican portraits. Later, Ramírez would visit Mexico City with the intent of moving his business, only to conclude that "everything there [was] still very backward and very disorganized."⁴

Despite these obvious signs of cultural adaptation, when some Anglo American supporters at the meeting counseled Belvedere's Mexicans to apply for naturalization, Ramírez was among the first to balk at the suggestion. These officials, among them municipal judges in the Belvedere area, argued that those Mexican immigrants without first papers would be unable to vote against incorporation, if the issue ever appeared in an election. But Ramírez joined *La Opinión* and the Mexican consulate representative in warning against this advice. To him, the negation of Mexican citizenship would have been a larger crime than that being perpetrated on the residents of Belvedere.⁵

How does one make sense of the contradictory aspects of this story? What does Zeferino Ramírez's life, and his reaction to the prospect of changing his citizenship, tell us about the cultural adaptation of Mexican immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century? Historians and social scientists have certainly struggled with the subject of the cultural adjustment of immigrants before. More than thirty years ago, David M. Potter noted the significance of issues surrounding immigrant acculturation in an essay about the American character. He argued that because virtually all Americans descended from immigrants, they were compulsively preoccupied with the question of national identity. Americans feel deprived of an organic connection to the past, especially when confronted with their diverse religious, linguistic, and political heritage. The result has been an obsessive fixation on the elusive tenets of "Americanism."⁶

Oscar Handlin had anticipated Potter's assessment of the impact of migration and acculturation on the American character when he described in *The Uprooted* his gradual realization that writing a history of immigration was, in fact, writing about all of American history. Handlin's account emphasized the loss of European peasant roots, the arduous journey across the Atlantic, and the painful, yet to him inevitable, process

of absorption into American society. Yet, as effective as he was in demonstrating the importance of the immigrant experience, Handlin mistakenly assumed that every immigrant shared the same process of cultural adaptation. Indeed, his thesis regarding the disintegration of peasant cultures in the New World was extended even beyond his European subjects to include African Americans and Latinos.⁷

In the last three decades, revisionist historians have argued that Handlin's tendency to collapse all groups' migration experiences into one story belittles the diversity of such events and distorts history. Moreover, they have taken direct aim at the notion that much was lost in the transition to life in the United States. They have pointed instead to the retention of Old World culture by many different groups of Americans and to its persistence and resiliency.⁸ Unlike Handlin and his contemporaries, the revisionist historians, Howard Rabinowitz has observed:

view such [cultural] persistence quite favorably and treat it as something that should have happened. In other words, the new social history not only finds evidence of strong ethnic and racial identification, but usually celebrates it, as well, though often expressing dismay at the frequent examples of inequality among groups.⁹

Groups of European immigrants that Handlin had depicted as thoroughly assimilated were freshly revised as retaining important ties to their Old World culture even after living for years in the United States. As one reviewer of this literature has noted, "since the 1960s . . . ethnicity has largely been transformed from a heathenish liability into a sacred asset, from a trait to be overcome in a conversion and rebirth experience to a very desirable identity feature to be achieved through yet another regeneration."¹⁰ This "new ethnicity" paradigm, in fact, came to dominate historical writing about immigration in the 1970s and 1980s.

So as to emphasize the continuity of culture, John Bodnar called his 1985 synthesis of the recent literature on immigration to the United States *The Transplanted* so as to leave no doubt that most immigrants had maintained their cultural roots, even when planted in different soil.¹¹

Historians of the Mexican American experience entered this debate at the height of the revisionist reinterpretation. Highly influenced by the struggles for national liberation in the Third World and the civil rights movements of both African Americans and Chicanos in the United States, particularly the calls for cultural nationalism, the Chicano historians who created the field in the late 1960s and early 1970s focused their attention on the retention of Mexican culture throughout the history of the American Southwest. Although Anglo American social scientists had earlier identified and bemoaned the retention of Mexican traits among the immigrant population, Chicano scholars now took the residues of Mexican culture as positive evidence of the existence of a distinct people who could, and often did, identify themselves in opposition to the majority Anglo society.¹²

every immigrant share same process

diversity of experiences

not all lost retention resiliency

ethnicity liability to an asset

maintain cultural roots

identity & opposition of Anglo society

Typical of this interpretation were the writings of Juan Gómez-Quíñones, considered the dean of Chicano history in the early 1970s. In particular, Gómez-Quíñones offered his 1977 essay, "On Culture," as a call to debate on culture academically and politically.¹³ Taking an approach largely derived from Amílcar Cabral and Antonio Gramsci, Gómez-Quíñones focused his attention on cultural resistance as the "negation of assimilation," downplaying any cultural act that was not "an act of struggle" against dominant and dominating values. For him, as for Handlin, there existed two cultural poles: "Mexicano" (or Old World ethnic for Handlin) "versus Anglo United States." Chicanos stood as a subculture between these two poles where "culture and identity is a safe-house and thus provides strategic and tactical elasticity vis-a-vis the dominant society." In this admittedly polemical essay, Gómez-Quíñones laid the basis for others' writings on Chicano culture when he argued that "to acculturate is not merely to exercise a cultural preference but to go to the other side."¹⁴

Ironically, though positioning himself in opposition to assimilation, Gómez-Quíñones in the end accepted the terms of the cultural debate set out by Handlin and others, terms that held immigrant assimilation to be inevitable. In the view of both historians, cultural adaptation occurred in a linear fashion with strict distinctions made between "traditional" and "modern" cultures.¹⁵ Both Mexican and American cultures were depicted largely as static, impermeable, and always in opposition, with individuals constantly pushed or pulled in one direction or the other. Moreover, Chicano culture was belittled on the one hand as primarily a way-station on the inevitable path toward assimilation into the American mainstream or on the other hand as representing the "U-turn" on the return road to a pronounced Mexican nationalist stance. Largely accepting this model of bipolar cultural opposites, most Chicano historians set out to document the cultural persistence of things Mexican in new American surroundings.

Not surprisingly, most historical writings on Chicanos that were influenced by this nationalist position emphasized cultural continuity in almost all geographical settings. Cultural retention was framed not necessarily as a conscious act of resistance, but rather as a condition of the racial and class separation inflicted on the Mexican population. For Richard Griswold del Castillo, for example, the barrio, though circumscribing social and economic possibilities for nineteenth-century Mexican residents of Los Angeles, made cultural survival possible. "Proximity of residence reinforced the language, religion, and social habits of Chicanos," observed Griswold del Castillo in his account, "and thus insured the continuation of their distinctive culture." Albert Camarillo added that for the twentieth-century residents of Santa Barbara, "facilitating continued contact among Mexicanos, the [mutualist] organizations helped perpetuate Mexican culture, language, and cohesiveness in an otherwise foreign society."¹⁶

racial + class separation → cultural continuity

Chicano historians have shared much with scholars working in the fields of African American, Native American, and Asian American history. These historians too have emphasized the importance of cultural persistence, primarily by examining how minority groups faced conflict within the host culture. Investigations of antebellum black life, for example, have been interested less in the intrusion of white culture into slave quarters than in the richness of a distinct African American culture "from sundown to sunup."¹⁷ Asian American historians have increasingly turned away from descriptions of their past as simply that of immigrants to interpretations which stress "the development of common cultural and psychological experiences in America that were rooted in, but not limited to, the cultures of the original ethnic communities."¹⁸ Central to each of these discussions has been the argument that the histories of racial minorities in the United States, and therefore the possibilities of their assimilation into American life, are qualitatively different from the experiences of European immigrants.¹⁹

Unfortunately, few historians of Chicanos writing in the 1970s and early 1980s took Gómez-Quíñones's "call to debate on culture" to heart. Instead of exploring and debating the issues he raised about the symbolic and transformative significance of culture, Chicano historians focused their work on developing important alternative theoretical approaches—such as internal colonialism, the process of barrioization, or the dual labor market theory—to explain the constraints on assimilation. All of these theories emphasized the impact of race and class. For example, the concept of a dual or segmented labor market has been used to explain the disadvantaged position of Mexican workers in the Southwest. This structural approach argues that while those in the primary sector enjoy relatively decent wages, labor conditions, job security, and union membership, those in the secondary sector, including racial minority groups such as Mexicans, are relegated to low-paying, "dead-end" jobs.²⁰ Such work has yielded important insights. These include the understanding that Chicanos' uneven participation in American society cannot be explained simply by citing racial intolerance. Hence, the complex intersection of racial and class oppression in the American Southwest became the centerpiece of scholarship in Chicano history and Chicano studies in the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ For these scholars, culture was simply a reflection of socio-economic conditions.

Though noting the severity of racial and class discrimination, some Chicano historians have also highlighted cultural change in the Mexican origin population, particularly among the children of immigrants and within the middle class. But these changes continue to be placed within a bipolar model of opposing cultures. Mario García, for example, has described a variety of experiences in El Paso, Texas, divided by age, nationality, and generation, which together resulted in "a Mexican border culture, neither completely Mexican nor American, but one revealing contrasting attractions and pressures between both cultures."²² Arnaldo De

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León also confirmed the diversity of cultural positions among nineteenth century Tejanos all along the Rio Grande, recognizing that "some became *agrijados*, some bicultural; others stayed Mexican."²³

While both authors recognize that change did occur on the northern side of the border, Mexican American culture remained a tenuous site of cultural exchange, always a prelude to the attractions of a "purely" Mexican or "purely" American stance. Even in their descriptions of the intermediate subculture, as Roger Rouse has observed, they noted "an ordered synthesis of old and new" which treated contradictions as temporary features that were certain to disappear with the passage of time and generations.²⁴ As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has pointed out, this "classic concept of culture seeks out the 'Mexican' or the 'Anglo-American,' and grants little space to the mundane disturbances that so often erupt during border crossings."²⁵

Recently, however, new perspectives offered by scholars working in the field of cultural studies force us to reexamine such static assumptions. Across a variety of disciplines, the very language used to describe the particularistic experiences of individuals—culture, ethnicity, identity, gender, and race—has been challenged.²⁶ In particular, any notion that individuals have occupied one undifferentiated cultural position—such as "Mexican," "American," or "Chicano"—has been abandoned in favor of the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions. Moreover, the strictly nationalist position of early Chicano historians has been questioned, not only by cultural theorists exploring the complicated historical allegiances in the ethnic past but also by Chicana feminists who claim that a single standard of ethnicity largely left women out of historical constructions.²⁷

"Culture," of course, has been one of the most hotly debated terms across disciplines throughout the twentieth century. If one looks at the changing language in anthropology, for example, a discipline that has claimed "culture" as its primary focus, one can see how volatile definitions themselves can become.²⁸ Once hoping to understand the "most complex whole," anthropologists have lately come to recognize the myriad contradictions inherent in cultural systems. Recent work by ethnographers who have drawn from textual analysis and cultural studies perspectives has gone further in questioning the ability of anthropologists to lay claim to being "scientists of culture".

Cultures are not scientific "objects" (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of "it," are produced historically, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture that can be "filled in," since the perception and filling of a gap lead to the awareness of other gaps. . . . If "culture" is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence.²⁹

It is not surprising that issues in Chicano culture should have such resonance for scholars reexamining our understanding of how culture and ethnicity work in the post-industrial age. For radical scholars, "culture is not what preexists this historic overlay [of capitalism], but is how humans whose lives are structurally defined by institutionally enacted capitalist principles respond to them in their everyday life and experience."³⁰ Since Mexican migrants move between two countries—one highly industrialized and the other severely impoverished—they have been among the first to experience what some have called the "postmodern condition." At least one anthropologist has recently suggested that we look toward the life experiences of these transnationals to understand our "confusing world, a world of crisscrossed economies, intersecting systems of meaning, and fragmented identities."³¹

Recently, Chicano scholars in art, literature, and anthropology have begun to develop notions of "trans-creation" to describe the process of cultural formation among Chicanos and other Latinos in the United States.³² The movement between Mexican and American cultures is not so much a world of confusion, but rather a place of opportunity and innovation. In Los Angeles, living in this cultural "borderlands" can also lend itself to adaptations drawn from African-American or other ethnic peoples, depending on the time period, the local community, and the level and nature of contact. As Gloria Anzaldúa has described this "mestiza" worldview, what often develops is "a tolerance of contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity."³³ Mexicans, long accustomed to cultural blending and creation, continue this custom in the United States, now incorporating aspects of the "others" they find in a multicultural setting like Los Angeles. To be Chicano, in effect, is to be betwixt and between.

Yet, is there still a "there" there? For earlier scholars, the comforting presence of Mexico was all that was needed in order to project a unified cultural concept to which Chicanos could turn. Yet "Mexico," maybe even more so than other nations, was a national community that had to be "imagined" to exist, particularly given its racial and regional diversity. Not only was culture never static in Mexico, nor U.S. influence ever far removed in shaping its contours, but the construction of a Mexican national identity was never more ferociously pursued than in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution—at the very moment thousands of Mexicans were making their way north.³⁴

Thus, my own study necessarily begins with an examination of the rural villages and burgeoning towns of Mexico. Mexico during the early twentieth century was undergoing fundamental socioeconomic upheaval. Partly because of this tumult, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans crossed the border into the United States, usually seeking temporary residence and better wages in order to help their families survive through difficult times. Yet the very meaning of crossing the border was undergoing a transformation during this period; moving north signified a momentous

US intervention in Mexican revol.

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Mexicans = postmodern, modern
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occasion. Though back-and-forth migration continued, increasingly durable settlement north of the border was a result of tightening immigration restriction. Los Angeles attracted an ever larger number of these migratory sojourners, drawn to the city because of its employment opportunities and vibrant Mexican community.

In the United States, new "traditions" had to be invented and older customs discarded or radically transformed at the same time that Mexicans in Mexico were creating "traditions" to cement national identity. The early twentieth century was certainly a period tailor-made for the invention of traditions on both sides of the border. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted:

Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imitating repetition. . . . There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the "invention" of tradition in this sense. However, we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which "old" traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated: in short, when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side.³⁵

Mexicans in the United States not only had to draw for their new traditions upon their memories of a Mexico now irreversibly transformed, but they also had to make sense of a new world north of the border that was undergoing rapid transformation. Nowhere was this more evident than in Los Angeles, where demographic upheaval meant that most residents were newcomers little versed in the culture of the region they now inhabited. Political and social power, however, was concentrated in the hands of a small group of Anglo American newcomers. This power enabled them to mold dominant "traditions" onto the cultural landscape of California.³⁶ The growth of the Chicano community in Los Angeles created a "problem" for Anglo American residents, one which resulted in public efforts to alter cultural loyalties among Mexican immigrants. American officials launched programs to teach these newcomers idealized versions of American practices, customs, and values. The Mexican government, for its part, worked through its consulate office to instill loyalty to Mexico, trying to persuade citizens to return to their native country. Neither of these efforts had their intended effect, but both ironically served to stimulate the process of self-recognition as ethnic Americans among the immigrant population.

These efforts reflect attempts by sovereign states to control the ethnic identity of a people in turbulent social and economic times in order to bring cohesion to their respective countries by implementing what one scholar has called the "fictive ethnicity" of the nation-state. Anglo Ameri-

cans in Los Angeles, as cultural newcomers themselves, were anxious to impose coherence on a region full of diversity. They acted as surrogates for the state apparatus in an attempt to minimize ethnic difference and tie these "other" recent arrivals to American society. Their goal was to alter outmoded values and customs without necessarily encouraging social mobility. Mexican government representatives, along with members of the expatriate community anxious to promote nationalist sentiment, engaged in a similar campaign to keep emigrants' loyalties linked to an emerging Mexican nation. Perhaps even more accurately, they hoped to create "Mexicans" out of former mestizo villagers.³⁷ In both cases, Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles appeared to these competing nationalists as "clean slates" or culturally empty vessels. Renato Rosaldo has noted the way ethnographers, accustomed to viewing cultures as self-enclosed, have similarly treated immigrants:

[T]he borders between nations, classes, and cultures were endowed with a curious kind of hybrid invisibility. They seemed to be a little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other. Movements between such seemingly fixed entities as nations or social classes were relegated to the analytical dustbin of cultural invisibility. Immigrants and socially mobile individuals appeared culturally invisible because they were no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become.³⁸

But Mexican immigrants played their own part in this drama. Constrained by their lack of economic and political stature, they drew strength from the networks of family members and fellow countrymen who lived nearby. Through the daily struggle to survive in an oftentimes hostile environment, these newcomers constructed a world for themselves, shaped both by their memories of their past lives and by the reality of their present situation. During the 1920s, many Mexican immigrants gradually changed their orientation from that of temporary sojourner to permanent resident. Much of this process occurred within the family context, as individual migrants married and raised families in Los Angeles. Cultural adaptations marked the transition to a Mexican American lifestyle. Catholic religious practice, for example, increasingly narrowed to the province of women, and became less a community function and more a set of rituals performed at home. The secular entertainment industry of Los Angeles reshaped Mexican musical traditions, as immigrants made Los Angeles a center for Chicano cultural life in the United States. The search for stability encouraged Mexican immigrants to settle in particular barrios and assume new roles within their families, at work, and as American consumers.

Ethnicity, therefore, was not a fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States. As such, ethnicity arose not only from interaction with fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans but also through dialogue and debate with the larger cultural world encountered

want coherence on a region full of diversity - minimize ethnic difference

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temporary -> permanent

back to Mexico + as immigrants

newcomer
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in Los Angeles. Whether accommodation, resistance, or indifference marked an individual's stance toward American culture, everyone reacted to living in the United States. For those who chose to stay, their cultural adaptations would have lifelong implications. For over time, as Mexican immigrants acclimated themselves to life north of the border, they did not remain Mexicans simply living in the United States; they became Mexican Americans. They assumed a new ethnic identity, a cultural orientation which accepted the possibilities of a future in their new land. As anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer observes about ethnicity:

Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided. It can be potent even when not consciously taught; it is something that institutionalized teaching easily makes chauvinist, sterile, and superficial, something that emerges in full—often liberating—flower only through struggle.³⁹

The struggle which forged a Mexican American identity was powerfully rooted in the decade of the 1930s. The onset of the Great Depression forced many Chicano residents to reconsider their decision to remain in the United States. Moreover, the deportation and repatriation campaigns launched against Mexicans in Los Angeles profoundly disrupted the cultural centeredness of the community. Los Angeles lost one third of its Mexican residents, and those who remained were made keenly aware of the fragility of their social position. The sons and daughters of the immigrant generation, entering adulthood during the late 1930s and early 1940s, became acutely sensitive to America's lack of tolerance. Hence, many became more active in American unions and struggles for civil rights. They found themselves profoundly affected by a generation of labor leaders, both Chicano and Anglo, who dedicated their lives to the fight for social equality in the era of the New Deal.

The repatriation campaign provided a symbolic break with the past for those who remained, while participation in American unions and other struggles for civic equality in the late 1930s and early 1940s created the context for a new identity. Rather than culture serving as a substitute for politics, it became a way to enter the political arena. As George Lipsitz has observed, culture can be a "means of reshaping individual and collective practice for specified interests... as long as individuals perceive their interests as unfilled, culture retains an oppositional potential."⁴⁰ Ironically, it was not the search for Mexican nationalism which engendered political radicalism for large numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the 1930s, but the forging of a new identity as ethnic Americans. "Cultural identity," as Stuart Hall has observed:

is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant

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transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves for eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past.⁴¹

This new cultural identity was forged within the context of a hostile, racist environment which sought to deny Mexican Americans a claim to being "Americans." The so-called "Zoot Suit Riots" in Los Angeles in 1943 were only the most outward manifestation of the racism they experienced. As a result, parents and children alike forged an ambivalent Americanism—one distinguished by a duality in cultural practices and a marked adaptability in the face of discrimination. Central to my thesis is the argument that Mexican American cultural adaptation occurred without substantial economic mobility, particularly since it was rooted in the context of the Great Depression. This book is in part a study of how cultural change can take place *without* social mobility. Previous studies of Chicanos in Los Angeles have been helpful in understanding the forces which militated against upward mobility among Mexican Americans.⁴² But, as we shall see, these earlier works have neglected to tell the fascinating story of cultural invention which must also be included in any portrait of working class life in these years.

My own study of Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles between 1900 and 1945 focuses on the related questions of cultural adaptation and ethnic identity, utilizing new perspectives from other disciplines and from cultural studies. I argue that the emphasis in Chicano history on bipolar models that have stressed either cultural continuity or gradual acculturation has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptation. This problem is particularly regrettable when one realizes that Mexicans have been among the most numerous and significant of immigrant groups in the United States during the twentieth century. They number well over half of the total current Latino population of 30 million—a population destined to become America's largest minority group within the next thirty years.

Los Angeles was selected as the site of my research for an obvious reason: by 1928 it had the largest Mexican population of any city in the United States. Additionally, understanding California's role in twentieth-century American culture is crucial. Latinos have had and will continue to have a profound effect on that culture, especially in Los Angeles. Currently, Los Angeles International Airport welcomes more immigrants than any other port of entry in American history. Public mythology, however, still reveres Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and looks toward Europe. Historical writing on immigration in the United States surely suffers from this severe regional imbalance; most studies still focus on the Northeast and selected cities of the Old Northwest. The fact that the American Southwest has been the locus of one of the most profound

Complex process of cultural adaptation

Cultural adaptation
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and complex interactions between variant cultures in American history is repeatedly overlooked.⁴³ Obviously, mainstream immigrant history has much to learn from historians whose focus is the American Southwest.

The narrative that follows, therefore, is my attempt to unravel the many layers of cultural adjustment among Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. As I attempt to tell this important story, I am humbled by the words of George Lipsitz, who reminds historians of our limitations:

We need to understand the past in order to make informed moral choices about the present, to connect our personal histories to a larger collective history. But that larger history can never be fully comprehended; the complexities and pluralities of the past always resist definitive evaluation and summary. Reconstructing the infinitely complex experiences of the past through the paltry bits of evidence about it available to historians inevitably renders some aspects of the past as incommunicable.⁴⁴

Zeferino Ramírez's refusal to give up his Mexican nationality when to do so might have aided him in facing an obvious external threat has led me to ask a multitude of questions. In answering them, I hope to offer some insights into the complex process of cultural adaptation, while gaining a better understanding of the difficult choices made by those who came before us.

*need to focus immigration
history on the Mexican
Southwest*

PART ONE

CROSSING BORDERS

"Cultures" do not hold still for their portraits.

—James Clifford, 1986¹

The psychology of the average Mexican alien unskilled worker from Mexico is that when he enters in any manner into the United States that he is only upon a visit to an unknown portion of his own country. He is independent and does not consider he is an immigrant alien, but rather in what is termed the United States by right of birth and possession, the country of his forebearers, the territory acquired after the war of 1846 and the territory subsequently ceded in 1856 known as the Gasden Purchase. To him there is no real or imaginary line.

—Report to the U.S. Secretary of Labor, 1922²

It must have been about ten at night, the train began to whistle.

I heard my mother say, "There comes that ungrateful train that is going to take my son."

"Goodbye my beloved mother, give me your blessings.

I am going to a foreign land, where there is no revolution."

Run, run little train, let's leave the station.

I don't want to see my mother cry for her beloved son, for the son of her heart.

Finally the bell rang, the train whistled twice.

"Don't cry my buddies, for you'll make me cry as well."

Right away we passed Jalisco, my, how fast the train ran. La Piedad, then Irapuato, Silado, then La Chona, and Aguas Calientes as well.

We arrived at Juarez at last, there I ran into trouble.

"Where are you going, where do you come from?

How much money do you have to enter this nation?"

"Gentlemen, I have money so that I can emigrate."

"Your money isn't worth anything, we have to bathe you."

Oh, my beloved countrymen, I am just telling you this,

That I was tempted to go right back across.

At last I crossed the border, and left with a labor agent.

And there, dear countrymen, was much that I endured.

—From the corrido, "El Deportado" (ca. 1930)³

Farewell Homeland

Carlos Almazán was born into a world on the brink of monumental change. The occasion of his birth around 1890 was undoubtedly celebrated throughout the estate near Zamora, Michoacán, where the Almazán family had resided for as long as anyone could remember. Neighbors congratulated his parents for having another strong boy, one that would, as he grew older, certainly improve the family's economic situation. The Almazáns made their living from the land, and in a late nineteenth-century Mexican community dependent on agriculture, every healthy child proved indispensable to the family's economic subsistence.¹

Unfortunately, tragedy soon struck—Carlos's father died. Señora Almazán had no choice but to carry on the farm work by herself with young sons. Although she struggled to maintain ownership of the land, the small farm gradually slipped from her hands. Like many others in the region, she became a sharecropper. As Carlos and his brothers grew older, they learned to plant corn and other grains, using old plows that had been passed from generation to generation. Farm work completely occupied their lives. With the help of her sons, who had been propelled by misfortune into early manhood, Señora Almazán gradually managed to stabilize her economic situation after the difficult decade following her husband's death.

But Carlos, now a teenager, grew restless. Tired of the backbreaking work in the fields, he decided to go to Mexico City. Such a decision would have been improbable only a few years before. Zamora and its surrounding communities had been relatively isolated until a newly constructed railroad connected the region to the nation's capital. This transportation network allowed Carlos to leave with high hopes and seek his fortune in the city. It was not long before Carlos made a promising start selling meat and other foods on the streets. He soon married and had children. Yet his prosperity was short-lived. How could he have predicted that Mexico would soon be embroiled in a revolution that would

1.5 M Mexicans migrate bet. 1900-1930
Crossing Borders

leave him bankrupt? Defeated, Carlos and his family returned to Zamora, but not for long. At the urging of his older brother, Carlos once again made a momentous decision regarding his future: he boarded a train for the north, leaving his homeland for the United States in 1920.

Carlos became part of a massive movement of individuals and families who crossed the Mexican border to the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Approximately one and a half million Mexicans migrated northward between 1900 and 1930, most settling in the Southwest. This process eventually made Mexico one of the largest single sources of immigration to the United States. For Mexico, the migration resulted in the loss of about 10 percent of its total population by 1930.²

Most scholars who have analyzed this movement north have focused almost exclusively on the socio-economic factors involved in this migration. This chapter will review those issues, but will also put into context the larger cultural questions raised by such a massive movement of people between two nations with unique histories. The railroads not only led to economic growth in Mexico and the American Southwest, they also facilitated the transmission of cultural values and practices between the two countries.

By concentrating on cultural transformations occurring in Mexican villages, this chapter will also examine the beliefs and traditions that immigrants to the north brought with them. The structure of authority in the village, the rise of Mexican nationalism, and the adaptations in familial customs in this period all played a role in defining the outlook of Mexican immigrants. Finally, this chapter will explore the very decision to migrate itself, one which was clearly driven by economic considerations but also culturally conditioned. This examination will stress that the culture Mexican migrants brought with them, rather than being a product of a stagnant "traditional" society, was instead a vibrant, rather complicated amalgamation of rural and urban mores, developed in Mexican villages during half a century of changing cultural practices.

Recent scholarship has made clear that migration to California is not merely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Ever since Mexico had lost its northern territories in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, there had been movement of Mexicans into the United States. With the discovery of gold in 1848, perhaps as many as 20,000 experienced miners rushed to California from Sonora and Zacatecas, only to be driven out of the mines by the early 1850s. Yet despite the many returnees, this migration probably still signified a larger movement north to California than any other during the entire Spanish (1771-1821) and Mexican (1821-48) eras.

While Mexicans drifted across the border during the remainder of the nineteenth century, most located in the mining towns of southern Arizona or the ranches and farms of south Texas, where they were within easy reach of their homeland. These two states alone accounted for over

Mexico loses 10% of pop by 1930
R.R.s → growth by immigrants of cultural values
Gold rush

19
Forewell Homeland
born residents

80 percent of the 103,393 Mexican-born residents of the United States in 1900. Despite the heavy gold-rush migration to California, the 1900 census reported only 8,086 inhabitants of that state who were born in Mexico. This figure is striking when compared with the approximately eight to ten thousand noted at the time of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.⁴ Although migration had occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century, it paled in comparison to the mass exodus of Mexicans in the first thirty years of the twentieth. This time California, which in particular had received relatively few Mexican immigrants before 1900, experienced a dramatic rise in the proportion of new settlers.

No historian of the period disputes the notion that the American Southwest held strong economic attractions—often characterized as pull factors—for such immigrants. The mining industry in Arizona and New Mexico had encouraged Mexicans to cross the border even in the late nineteenth century. After 1900 the growth of mines in these states, as well as in Colorado and Oklahoma, induced more workers to flock to the area. Mexicans also played a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of southwestern railroad networks. In addition, railroad work provided the transportation by which job seekers moved from site to site throughout the Southwest.

However, it was the expansion of agriculture which created the most pronounced demand for labor, particularly in California. Irrigation revolutionized California farming, allowing arid land to be converted into vast new farms. By 1929, California became the largest producer of fruits and vegetables in the Southwest, a region generating 40 percent of the total United States output. Meanwhile, Mexicans rapidly replaced the Japanese as the major component of the agricultural labor force.

Although certainly paid less than Anglo Americans, a Mexican worker could earn a wage in any of these three industries far above the 12 cents a day paid on several of the rural haciendas of central Mexico. For example, clearing land in Texas paid 50 cents a day, while miners earned well over \$2.00 per day. Most railroad and agricultural laborers were paid between \$1 to \$2 a day.⁵

The demand for labor created by the expansion of southwestern industry in the early twentieth century was compounded by the curtailment of Asian and European immigration; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1907-8 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, and, finally, the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924 all effectively limited other sources of cheap labor.⁶ Employers began to look longingly toward Mexico as a source of labor for their steadily increasing needs. Not surprisingly, immigration restrictions directed against Mexicans were at first consistently deferred under pressure by southwestern employers and then, when finally enacted, were mostly ignored by officials at the border. American administrators, in effect, allowed migrants to avoid the head tax or literacy test—instituted in 1917—by maintaining sparsely monitored

growth of mines
expansion of ag. sector
immig. restrict. towards Mexico
overlooked by employers
Immigrants expansion of ag. sector in Southwest
Effect on limits to immig.

Checkpoints aren't monitored
Crossing Borders
20

tored checkpoints even after the establishment of the border patrol in 1924.

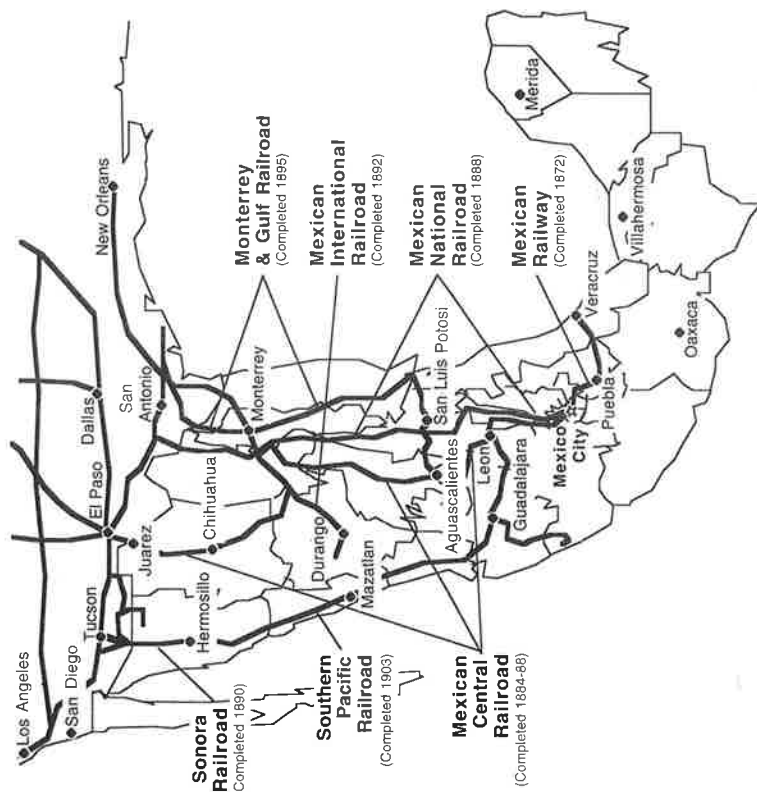
More characteristic of prevailing American attitudes toward Mexican immigration before the 1930s, however, was the elaborate network of employment agencies and labor recruiters stationed in border towns such as El Paso. These networks provided the workers for the railroads, factories, and farms throughout the West. Although the contract labor provision of American immigration law strictly prohibited the hiring of foreign workers before their emigration, agents often traveled undisturbed to the interior of Mexico and to towns along the border to search out likely candidates.

The pull factors represented by a burgeoning southwestern economy and a federal government willing to allow undocumented migration through a policy of benign neglect were factors which contributed to mass migration across the border during the early years of the twentieth century. But there were complicated "push" factors as well. Changes in the Mexican economy under the thirty-five-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz were perhaps even more important than American industrial development in bringing Mexicans to the United States.

The Díaz administration followed a land policy which encouraged the growth of large haciendas at the expense of small farmers and communally owned lands, or *ejidos*. While the more productive haciendas grew significant quantities of sugar and coffee for export, thousands of rural poor were left landless. Previously independent peasants were forced into debt peonage or into joining the growing migratory labor stream. At the same time, the shift to export crops severely decreased the production of maize, the staple food in the Mexican diet. Along with other governmental policies, this decline in production boosted the cost of living. Simultaneously, wages fell because of the labor surplus created by both the land policy and the population boom of the late nineteenth century. By the time of the Revolution of 1910, these factors had combined to bring the rural masses of Mexico to the brink of starvation.

Although the violence and economic disruption brought about by the revolution did not alone cause Mexican emigration to the United States, they certainly played a crucial role in stimulating movement. While *campesinos* crossed the border fleeing for their personal safety, hacienda owners often fled for fear of reprisals from their employees. Warring factions also destroyed farmland and railroads, bringing much of the economy to a halt. Unemployment rose along with inflation, forcing many to leave Mexico simply to survive. For other agricultural workers, revolution severed the bonds of debt peonage, emancipating workers from their haciendas and freeing them to move north.⁸

Migration occurred before, during, and after the revolution, but became practical only after the development of a railroad transportation network in Mexico linking the populous central states with the northern border. Indeed, a clearer understanding of the role of the railroads in



Map 1 Main Railroad Lines in Mexico, 1910

Sources: Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931: Socio-Economic Patterns* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1980), p. 15; Paul J. Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 74.

creating the exodus reveals that Mexican immigration to the United States cannot be viewed simplistically in push-pull terms. The process was a great deal more complex. The creation of the Mexican railway system was both a product of and had consequences for not just one, but both sides of the border. Accordingly, classifying the factors contributing to emigration into "American" and "Mexican" ones can mask the unique relationship between these two neighbors—a relationship shared by no other country that has contributed masses of immigrants to American society.

Railroad development in Mexico occurred almost entirely during the Porfiriato—the reign of dictator Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1910. The year before he took office, Mexico had a mere 663 kilometers of railway lines in service. In contrast, when Díaz resigned in 1910, Mexico's railroad network stretched 19,748 kilometers, representing a thirtyfold in-

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crease in thirty-five years. More important, the rapid expansion of the rail system linked central Mexico to the northern border with completion of the two major railroads of the nation, the Mexican Central and the Nacional (see Map 1).⁹

Díaz hoped that the creation of a national railroad system would unify the nation and modernize its economy. Consequently, he aggressively encouraged foreign investment, since Mexico itself lacked the capital needed to finance construction on such a grand scale. By 1911, American investments in Mexican railroads totaled over \$644 million, 61.7 percent of the total capital in support of the system. This amount more than doubled the total American investment in any other Mexican industry. Many influential Americans were involved in railroad promotion in Mexico, including such prominent figures as former President Ulysses S. Grant and the utopian reformer Albert Kimsey-Owen.¹⁰

Quickly, however, the same financial magnates that controlled the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and other railroads in the American Southwest became the major shareholders in Mexican railroads. Financiers J. Pierpont Morgan, Jay Gould, Collis P. Huntington, Thomas Nickerson, and Thomas A. Scott dominated investment in railroads on both sides of the border. As one journalist predicted upon seeing the Southern Pacific begin to build an extension into Sinaloa, "Mountainous Tepic . . . and aristocratic, languor-loving Jalisco . . . are about to be swung upon the railway chain that Uncle Sam swings from his belt." Rather than creating the strong, independent economy that he had hoped for, Díaz unintentionally made Mexico an economic appendage of the United States. By 1911, the United States received more of Mexico's trade than all European nations combined, and between one-fourth and two-fifths of all American foreign investments went to Mexico.¹¹

On a local level, the coming of the railroad drove up land prices and led to increased concentration of land ownership among the *hacendados*. Communal village property was expropriated and small landowners found it extremely difficult to hold onto their plots. It is probable that the railroad that eventually took Carlos Almazán away from Zamora played an important role in forcing his mother into sharecropping. Porfirian officials encouraged this new concentration of landownership because they believed that only large-scale agricultural production would lead to "progress." Villages which had existed for centuries with systems of widespread land ownership saw this traditional form of equilibrium disintegrate in favor of a highly stratified society.¹²

The railroads also introduced new ideas and material goods, producing other profound changes in Mexican society. Some Mexican-intellectuals referred to this uprooting of culture as the "Americanization" of Mexico. Yet despite such dissent, most of the Mexican elite welcomed the sudden appearance of American and European goods into the middle-class markets of Mexico City and other regional centers. Many claimed that this process would lift the largely Indian nation out of its "traditional backwardness" and pull Mexico into the twentieth century.

enjoy american goods

Such attitudes were reflected in legislation passed by several states banning the *pantalón*, the traditional baggy cotton pants worn by the men of the central plateau. Euro-American style slacks, made readily available by the railroads for purchase throughout the region, became the preferred fashion. Significantly, beer replaced *tequila* as the most popular beverage in northern Mexico. American railroad workers on Mexican lines introduced baseball in urban centers throughout central and northern Mexico, while D. S. Spaulding opened sporting-goods stores in Mexico City in 1888. As baseball became the most popular sport in the northern state of Sonora, the loss of spectators forced bullrings in the region to close.¹³

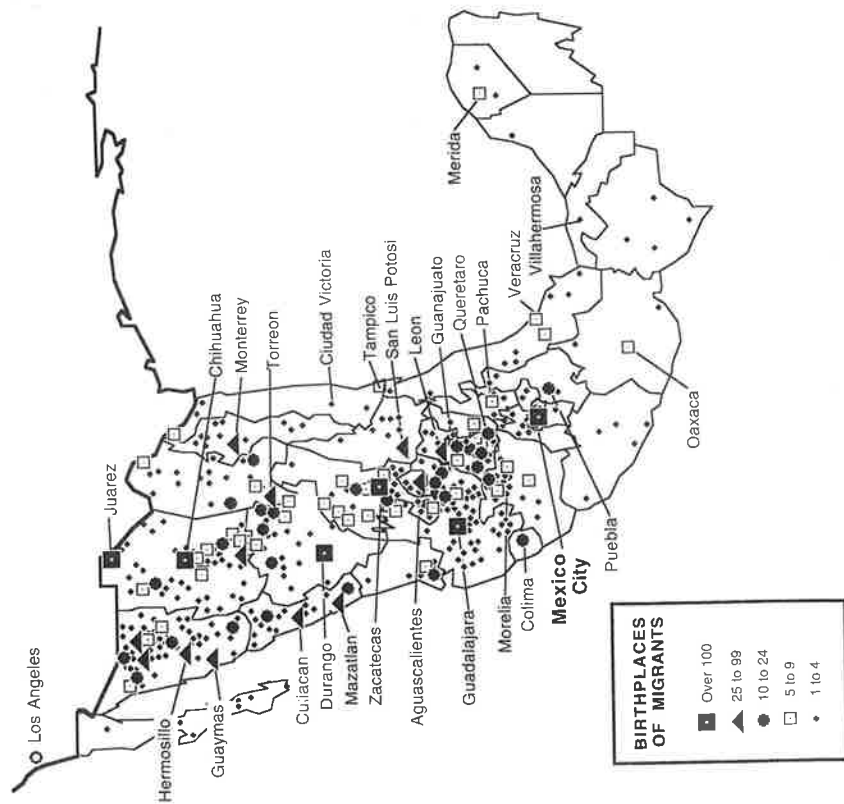
Of course, this penetration into Mexico of Euro-American culture was uneven. Many villages remained relatively isolated, especially if they were bypassed by the railroad lines. Those communities located directly in the path of the railroads retained established ways of doing things even as they instituted innovations. One American commentator, for example, pointed to the irony of seeing women and burros carrying heavy loads to markets on the very roads which followed the paths of the trains. In Tepoztlán, a modern mill stood idle as women continued to grind their own corn, despite the additional time and effort the task required.¹⁴

On the other hand, sewing machines rapidly appeared in the modest homes and isolated villages of central Mexico. The machine itself became a status symbol among villagers, while it provided the necessary tool for an alternative source of income through clothing manufacturing. According to Ernesto Galarza, who grew up in the isolated mountain village of Jalcoacán, Nayarit, the sewing machine was so esteemed that only his mother was allowed to touch it. However, all could marvel at the "remarkable piece of machinery"—this product of modern civilization—to see "the treadle see-saw dizzily, the belt whip around the balance wheel, the thread jerk and snake from the spool, and the needle stab the cloth with incredible speed."¹⁵

The railroad, however, could as easily close off certain options for income as open others up. In northwestern Michoacán, the coming of the railroad to one agrarian town in 1899 displaced many different kinds of workers. Muleteers, who had previously provided the backbone of the local transportation network, were the first to be driven from the scene. Wheat stopped being milled locally since it became cheaper to ship it to Mexico City, Toluca, or Irapuato—larger urban centers—for processing, thereby displacing other laborers. Traditional handicraft workers and other artisans who had provided most goods for local consumption saw their modest fortunes evaporate as new city-made goods were introduced into town. Finally, as the railroad and increased irrigation made more intensive agriculture possible and profitable, the demand for sharecroppers diminished.¹⁶

The Mexican immigrant during this period most often came from these unsettled communities exhibiting both customary modes of thought and behavior and recently arrived examples of machinery and

RR - displaces workers



Map 2 The Birthplaces of Mexican Migrants to Los Angeles in the Early Twentieth Century

Source: Naturalization Documents, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

culture. Map 2 shows that most were born in areas within a day's walk from the railroad lines, while many saw the trains pass right through their own villages. Although a significant group came from urban centers such as Mexico City or Guadalajara, areas which were heavily influenced by Euro-American culture, most were representatives of smaller towns and villages in transition. A large group of immigrants came from the northern border states, particularly Chihuahua and Sonora, which maintained constant, ample contact with their American neighbors. Few came from areas, such as the tropical southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, that were relatively isolated from the profound changes taking place in Mexican society.

To describe adequately the culture that immigrants from Mexico

brought with them to the United States, careful attention must be paid to these communities in transition. Fortunately, the work of pioneer anthropologists such as Robert Redfield and Manuel Gamio provide us with descriptions of early twentieth-century village life in central Mexico. More recently, historians of Mexico such as Luis González and Carlos B. Gil have written "microhistories" of several municipalities, works which resemble the community studies that have been written over the last two decades by American social historians. Studies by other social scientists working in Mexican villages in the post-World War II era, such as Erich Fromm and George M. Foster, can, if used selectively and carefully, provide additional insights into the social and cultural life of earlier migrants to the United States.¹⁷

Too often Mexican culture during this important period of change has been portrayed as static and "traditional." This description is rooted in the work of social scientists, particularly anthropologists, who ventured from the academies of the United States or Mexico City in search of the traditional Mexican countryside—the antithesis of modernity and industrial society. Their picture of Mexican culture among the peasantry, therefore, was usually set in sharp contrast to the society of the observer.¹⁸ In truth, substantial interaction with urban and industrial society characterized much of rural Mexico during this period. A few anthropologists in the period recognized this situation and incorporated this interaction into their models and descriptions. Robert Redfield, for example, developed the anthropological definition of "acculturation" based on his fieldwork in the Mexican countryside with villagers in contact with modern society.¹⁹ Rather than simply abandoning a world characterized by cultural systems passed from generation to generation, Mexicans who eventually came to the United States in the early twentieth century were products of a vibrant, rapidly changing society, one which was coming to terms with what in the future would be both modern and Mexican.

One can accurately describe Mexico during the Porfiriato as a nation of villages, albeit villages undergoing profound social and economic change. Mexico in 1910 had only 68 cities over 10,000 in population, while the United States contained 601 in the same year. Outside of Mexico City and Guadalajara, no other city in Mexico had over 100,000 inhabitants. Like other predominantly agricultural nations, a great number of smaller centers with several hundred or a few thousand people dotted the Mexican landscape. Unlike the United States, the largely agricultural Mexican population almost never lived on isolated farms, but rather congregated in small towns. Even the urban areas in Mexico, defined as communities with a population of over 2000, resembled overgrown villages.²⁰

In almost every village and barrio, the plaza acted as the community's center. Here one found the local church and the marketplace, surrounded by the shops and dwellings of those who provided services and leader-

Mexican culture is not static + trad.

small towns + villages

forced to weave "with ever greater intensity" during all waking hours of the day, "and even while walking." Every opportunity to make additional income had to be intensified since subsistence agriculture rapidly disintegrated as an option for survival. Moreover, younger and female children replaced the men alongside women weavers, since husbands and older male children were now looking for day labor. The practice of women aiding the effort of fishing or farming at crucial times in the harvest cycle diminished, except if the entire family was engaged in sharecropping. Tortilla-making had previously engaged two older women for one to three hours a day because of the time required to grind the corn and pat out the tortillas; increasingly, poverty began to be judged by the inability of women to provide enough tortillas for their families because of lack of time and the unavailability of maize.²⁴

With changes in the economic and political order, novel influences intruded on older lifestyles. Accentuated class divisions increased the leverage of the wealthier sectors of many communities. Despite general social intimacy in all relationships in Mascota, Jalisco, Carlos Gil found strict social protocol practiced when addressing someone of higher economic status. For example, Rosendo, the indentured plantation worker, always referred to Ascension, the merchant, or Ponciano, the landowner, "as *usted*, invariably prefixing their first names with the title *don*." "Rosendo never became *don Rosendo* to anyone" and was invariably addressed with the informal *tú*.²⁵

The gradual advent of literacy complicated these social dynamics. Those who provided the previously isolated, often illiterate, villagers access to the larger Mexican nation and the outside world also became important local figures. In the town of San José de Gracia in Michoacán, the influence of the schoolmasters expanded as villagers were divided into those who had access to the printed page and those who did not. The middle-class merchant who traveled to distant markets earned much respect from the village by bringing back news and goods from the city. The mule driver, or *arriero*, who ventured into the mountainous region of Mascota after having passed through populous Guadalajara, ancient Ameca, or strategic Puerto Vallarta returned with important information, especially during revolutionary periods. Along with merchants and muleteers, rancheros, artisans, state employees, and teachers were the largest beneficiaries of increased schooling during the Porfiriato. For communities largely dependent on word-of-mouth communication, these individuals were critical intermediaries linking together a mixed literate/illiterate network of discourse.²⁶

Porfirio Díaz's educational policies, however, had uneven consequences throughout Mexico. Although the number of public primary schools doubled and enrollments tripled during the Porfiriato, 68 percent of all Mexican adults still could not read in 1910. Moreover, gender differences in literacy expanded in the period, with only 13 percent of women in 1910 capable of both reading and writing, compared with a

Merchants
bargain
back
hours
+ goods
from
city

68% illiterate

ship. Built into the weekly schedule were periods of relaxation from the drudgery of work in which both men and women used the plaza to do their shopping, attend religious worship, or simply meet with friends. At these times, villagers shared their feelings about community issues and hopes for and fears of the future. Ironically, community affiliation among Mexicans and the role of the plaza were strengthened as railroads solidified the importance of central markets and urban centers of exchange. Even individuals who lived outside of the town proper periodically came into the plaza to exchange their goods, using the opportunity to reestablish ties to the villagers. Such centers acted as a "focus of culture," encouraging the display both of a refined social etiquette and of agrarian folkways. As migrants left Mexico for the north, they attempted to recreate these centers of communication.²¹

Within each village, authority was divided among a variety of individuals. Traditionally, elderly men were respected for their wisdom and contribution to the community over many years. In Jalisco, *Nayarit*, *Don Cleofas*, the oldest person in the pueblo whom everyone called "Tata," provided the village with its history, passing down orally to the younger generations the stories of *jalcotecanos* fighting Spanish conquistadors and French soldiers. Moreover, these men were usually patriarchs of a large constellation of families living in the village and surrounding communities. Older women, like Doña Eduvijas of Jalisco, often gained the respect of the younger generations with their tales of the supernatural. Others, like midwives, played important roles in life cycle events, thereby exercising a certain community-wide respect.²²

Respect, however, did not necessarily translate into power, either economic or social, in Porfirian Mexican society. In particular, women who had been restricted by the edicts of the Catholic Church and the dynamics of a communal family economy now found themselves increasingly separated from the emerging cash-focused economic order. Unlike the description of increased female power in New Mexican village communities provided by historian Sarah Deutsch, women in Mexican villages along the railroad route quickly lost whatever standing they had possessed because the entire village was absorbed into a network where mobility became fundamental for economic survival. This transformation led to changes in community-held values, changes which stressed access to outside information and economic opportunity, while women's place continued to be circumscribed to household and village activities. Women continued to be active in productive work and providing village stability, but this very activity was rapidly devalued in the new mobile order.²³

In Naranja, Michoacán, for example, women along with men had previously engaged in part-time weaving of straw mats and hats to supplement a subsistence economy of intensive agriculture and fishing. Once Porfirian hacienda agriculture was instituted, which used a developed railroad network to get grain to other parts of Mexico, women were

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weaving activities
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plaza = center of communication
Crossing Borders
26

few officials emanated from the communities they served and most listened more readily to their superiors in the state capitals and Mexico City than to local sentiment. There existed a general distrust of government and its representatives, and most villagers were happy to have minimal contact with people holding any formal office. Even when a certain town was transformed by the national government into a political entity of importance, such as San José de Gracia's promotion from a *ranchería* to the seat of a *tenencia*, tension often continued to exist between local political leaders and higher authorities.³⁰ According to Luis González, villagers in that area felt "if there were so many taxes . . . if there were no jobs . . . if the courts were corrupt . . . it was all the fault of the authorities, who had no fear of God."³¹

This situation suggests that Porfirio Díaz's plan to unify the nation and promote patriotism was far from successful. While the railroads did link many important regional centers with the nation's capital, many communities remained isolated and uninterested in the national politics. The people of Tepoztlán, living only fifty miles from Mexico City, did not celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the Mexican constitution because most had no notion of what the national patriotic fiesta meant. Their definition of patriotism extended only to the borders of the mountain-walled valleys of northern Morelos. In contrast, however, in San José de Gracia political arguments did arise. Some undoubtedly were fueled by articles in *El País*, the national Catholic newspaper, or by discussions among the seminary students who had traveled outside the immediate surroundings.³² About the budding nationalism of San José's villagers, Luis González has written:

On the eve of the revolution their lives were beginning to be affected by nationalistic sentiments, an interest in politics, an awareness of the outside world, curiosity about new inventions, and the desire to make money. Whether they liked it or not, the social elite were coming to realize, to feel, and to welcome the fact that they were inscribed in the diocese of Zamora, the district of Jiquilpan, the state of Michoacán, and the Republic of Mexico. The better-informed citizens know who Porfirio Díaz, Aristeo Mercado, and the prefects of Jiquilpan were; but the majority were unaware of the move toward nationalism, or even toward regionalization.³³

Most Mexicans who came to the United States in this period were from areas experiencing this maturing, yet uneven, national sentiment. Yet most remained full of distrust of central authority.

Another factor that limited the spread of Mexican nationalism was racial diversity. At the end of the Porfiriato, Mexico still had two million Indians who did not speak Spanish, a group cast aside by Díaz's program of unifying the nation. The Spanish elite, concentrated in the urban centers, remained distant and impervious to the needs of the masses. The largest segment of the Mexican population were the mesti-

in different to masses
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33 percent male literacy rate. The gap between female and male literacy fifteen years earlier had been only 7 percent. Outside of the Federal District, most of the central plateau of Mexico, especially in the rural villages, experienced only minimal advances in schooling and literacy. In Mascota, Jalisco, educational institutions existed "despite enormous odds and only at the behest of enlightened municipal authorities or private parties who supported them." The Catholic Church continued to organize most schooling, since it was not until 1921 that a constitutional amendment permitted the federal government to provide public education for all its citizens. A comprehensive rural school program was not established until 1934.²⁷

On the other hand, states in northern Mexico spent the most on primary schooling, enrolled the highest percentage of school-age children, and achieved the highest rates of adult literacy: an average of 45 percent, as compared with 27 percent in the center and 14 percent in the impoverished south. This advancement was made possible because this region was relatively commercially prosperous and revenue-rich, thereby allowing a greater expenditure on education. Public education dominated in the north, representing 90 percent of primary schools in Sonora, for example, as compared with one-half to two-thirds in the north-central states. Moreover, the gender gap in literacy in the north was much smaller than that which existed farther south. According to the 1910 census, the gap between male and female literacy in both Sonora and Chihuahua was less than 3 percent; in the central state of Michoacán the gap widened to 5 percent; while next door in Guanajuato an 8 percent gap existed. These differences between regions would prove vital to making a distinction between migrants to Los Angeles from the north and those from the central states of Mexico.²⁸

Despite the changes occurring in the countryside, the local priest continued to stand out as the most important authority figure in most Mexican villages of the period, particularly in central Mexico. He represented to the populace the elaborate institutional network of the Catholic Church, beginning with the bishop to whose jurisdiction he immediately answered. In San José de Gracia, "Padre Othón was the highest authority" who "presided over all social ceremonies; he prescribed them, embellished them, and saw that children and adults alike took part in them." According to an anthropologist studying another village in Michoacán, the priest's support in the community was the result of his role as intercessor between God and the villagers. Armed with the threat of withholding the favor of God, the local priest was able to coerce individuals to take certain actions in decisions far removed from purely religious matters.²⁹

In contrast, government officials were usually seen as outsiders, interlopers in community affairs, and interested only in milking the village of its resources through taxation and graft. Barely tolerated by the villagers,

Table 1. Racial Complexion of Mexican Immigrants to Los Angeles

Complexion	Number	Percentage
Dark (including brown, brunette, olive, and ruddy)	1,608	82.9
Medium (including medium dark and medium fair)	184	9.5
Light/fair (including light brown and white)	148	7.6
Total	1,940	100.0

Source: Declarations of Intention, Naturalization Records, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

zos, those containing both Spanish and Indian blood, although exactly where "Indian" ended and "mestizo" began was as often a function of social definition as it was a boundary set by genetic configuration. The source of most of the emigration to the United States was clearly mestizo/Indian, particularly from areas in Mexico that were deemed by anthropologists to be dominated by "acculturated Indians"—that is, where Indians spoke Spanish and blended native and European practices. An indicator of this racial makeup is the complexion of immigrants to Los Angeles as subjectively recorded by Immigration Bureau officials and presented in Table 1. This evidence suggests that the vast majority were either mestizo or Indian.³⁴

Social commentators in Mexico often argued that the predominance of this mestizo/acculturated Indian in Mexican society softened racial attitudes in favor of public tolerance. For example, a citizen of Arandas, undoubtedly a light-skinned Spaniard, compared attitudes toward race in Mexico with that in the United States: "There is a more universal spirit here—more a spirit of social distinction and class than of race." Mexican history had unquestionably produced more of a class than caste society by 1910, yet racist thinking drawing on the works of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer influenced liberal thinkers during the Porfiriato at the end of the nineteenth century. The Mexican Revolution turned these ideas on their heads, but did not do away with either racial antagonism in the villages nor racial control by non-Indians in the capital. In fact, color consciousness permeated Mexican culture of the period. As we shall see in later chapters, the attitudes that the largely Spanish elite held toward the mestizo/Indian would shape government policies both toward villages in Mexico and toward immigrants in the United States.³⁵

The one institution that all Mexicans valued and the only one that could compete in importance with the village and the church was the family. The strength of the Mexican family was rooted in the formal social bonds that held together individual members, beginning with the rites of courtship and the ritual of marriage. Even these sacred practices,

however, were undergoing tremendous change brought about by the rapid economic and social transformation of Mexico. Importantly, fewer parents were able to arrange marriages, since adolescents were sent off at early ages to earn money, resulting in the loosening of parental control over their behavior.³⁶ Thus, geographic mobility greatly increased the threat of erosion of parental lines of authority within families. In my analysis of case records of Mexicans who immigrated to Los Angeles before 1940, only 28.6 percent of those marriages occurring in Mexico were between individuals from the same place of birth. Of course, even less parental authority prevailed when young Mexican adults chose their marriage partners after migrating to the United States.³⁷

This transformation from parental control of marriage partners to personal choice was indirectly linked to the penetration of capitalist markets and the increased mobility of young adults. Ramón Gutiérrez, in a stunning analysis of courtship and marriage in colonial New Mexican villages, described this development in the nineteenth century:

The displacement of persons through rural landlessness and the creation of wage laborers and petty producers for the market broke down the hierarchical authority relationships between a father and his children and allowed greater personal choice in partner selection at marriage. Freedom from the moral constraints of a village economy through migration for employment and the loosening of patriarchal control due to new material exigencies, allowed persons to behave more as individuals and to choose their spouses on the basis of love.³⁸

Nevertheless, in some villages great care was taken by all to institute practices which legitimized parental authority in new ways. George Foster, for example, found that as late as the 1950s in the village of Tzintzuntzan, the act of *robo*, or elopement, was the preferred method of engagement. Rather than the actual "robbing" of a young woman against her wishes, this custom was part of a highly stylized ritual enacted by the young couple to circumvent direct control by the parents of their children's choice of a mate. At the same time, *robo* was followed by a formal visit of the young man's father to the home of the young woman to *hacer las paces* ("to make peace formally"), apologize for his son's conduct, and legitimize the union. Though the woman's father feigned the proper offended dignity, he rarely objected. Foster suggests that this ritual was made possible by both the lack of real property to pass on that would necessitate more judicious marriage alliances and the desire to preserve a hierarchical family structure.³⁹

In many ways, there was nothing new in this maintenance of the social ideals of parental authority in the face of countless demonstrations of individual will by young people in love. Gutiérrez found similar discrepancies in court records as far back as the early eighteenth century between the formal norms established by the state and the church and the actual practices of New Mexicans. What had developed over time

loosening of parental authority!

less arranged marriages

||★

class
race

was more standard rituals which took the loss of parental authority fully into account. The power of the ideal, therefore, despite tremendous socio-economic changes, was manifested in continued marriage rituals which incorporated supposed "traditional values" as they obviously transformed them.⁴⁰

In this era, couples chose to maintain earlier village practices concerning engagement and matrimony even if their courtship had resulted from the new mobility of the era. Carlos Gil described in detail the formal engagement of twenty-three-year-old farmhand Rosendo Peña to twenty-two-year-old Trinidad Peña (no previous relation) in 1908 in Mascota, Jalisco. Both families walked two hours to the church notary office in town from their respective homes on the hacienda to arrange a *presentación*, or espousal, with the local pastor and the church notary. Forms were signed by the parents noting their approval of the union, even though Rosendo himself had initiated the relationship with Trinidad on his own while working as a laborer at a neighboring hacienda. Witnesses confirmed that the betrothed were upright Catholics. Plans for the three-day wedding festivities were carefully described and announced to the entire community.⁴¹

In Porfirian Mexico, marriage remained a momentous event in the life of a villager. It involved the creation of expectations for economic survival for the new family, and anxiety over its effect on the families of the spouses. In this agrarian society, romance had to be tempered with economic reality. Most marriages in Mascota occurred at the end of the wheat harvest in April or once the corn was gathered in November. Moreover, in contrast to the pervasive myth of widespread teenage marriage in rural Mexico, the seriousness of marriage was reflected in more mature unions. Gil reports that the median ages of grooms in Mascota in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was between twenty-five and twenty-six years, while for brides it was between nineteen and twenty-one years.⁴²

It does appear that the Mexican family at the turn of the century was undergoing a transformation from a highly patriarchal, stable institution with a strict separation of the sexes to a more adaptive and insecure structure forced to conform to increased geographic mobility and economic dislocation. The nature of the relations between the sexes has been a controversial topic in descriptions of family life in Latin America. In particular, the debate concerning to what extent *machismo* permeated male-female dynamics in the Mexican family has yet to be settled.⁴³

Although the ideal man might still be expected to possess the characteristics of "physical courage, cleverness, *machismo*, integrity, wealth in money and land and cattle, health, vigor, and, finally, 'manliness,'" in actuality, men of the peon class had a difficult time providing for their families and maintaining their own well-being under the Porfirian economy. Erich Fromm has called this kind of society the "undetermined patri-

archy," in which the attitude of toughness within *machismo* is actually a façade that masks a more pronounced sense of powerlessness. These tendencies which were just beginning to affect Porfirian society were more marked in fluid, mobile environments than in communities that retained their hold over acceptable behavior. The more cavalier and destructive aspects of *machismo*, ranging from alcoholism to wife beating, seemed to be a result of the breakdown of community control, a situation which better characterized the growing urban centers and the northern border communities.⁴⁴

For women, the one ideal most valued was female chastity before marriage, which historically had been linked to the social class system. Unlike the notion of "female passionlessness" in Victorian America, women in Mexico were seen as particularly vulnerable creatures whose honor had to be protected by men. Chastity functioned as less a notion of female responsibility and more as a function of community and social class mores. The rigidity of this code of behavior, however, was differentiated by one's position in the social hierarchy, with the aristocracy most concerned with preserving female purity. Working-class women, and those of Indian/mestizo background, were less restricted by this ideal, yet their variance from it was clearly used as evidence of their inferiority. During the nineteenth century, the disparity between the ideal of female purity, along with other familial ideals, and the day-to-day reality grew larger because of increased mobility of the population and the breakdown in effective community control of behavior.⁴⁵

Sex for procreation in marriage, however, was expected and encouraged. Young brides could envision spending much of the next twenty to thirty years bearing children and being primarily responsible for raising them. Most women in Mascota, Jalisco, for example, bore five or more children, with some giving birth to many more. High mortality, particularly for those under the age of five, accompanied high fertility, however. Children under the age of six made up nearly half of those that died in Mascota during the Porfiriato. Seen from another perspective, in this village, approximately one-quarter of all infants did not live beyond the first five years of life, many succumbing to epidemics of smallpox, stomach disorders, or fevers. Despite the prevalence of infant mortality, rural Mexican society in the Porfirian age consisted mostly of youngsters because of the high birth rate and low life expectancies of adults. Nearly 50 percent of the population in Mascota in 1895 was under the age of twenty.⁴⁶

During the revolutionary period, wartime violence and economic upheaval did not escape children. Adolescents were particularly vulnerable to its repercussions. Stories of young females victimized by rape abound in the literature of the period. Left to fend for themselves because fathers and older brothers were off fighting in the war or working in distant fields, girls could be attacked by rebel or government troops or by local

Table 2. Age of Migrants at Time of First Crossing

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Child						
Under 13	581	30.1	261	37.7	842	32.1
Adolescent						
13 to 15	184	22.6	67	19.2	251	21.8
16 to 18	253		66		319	
Young adult						
19 to 21	235	22.4	72	20.7	307	21.9
22 to 24	197		71		268	
Adult						
25 to 29	187	24.9	68	22.4	255	24.2
30 to 39	214		68		282	
40 to 49	67		17		84	
Over 49	12		2		14	
Total	1,930	100.0	692	100.0	2,622	100.0

Source: Naturalization Records, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

men. Oscar Lewis described the experience of Guadalupe, the maternal aunt of the Sánchez children, as an adolescent in revolutionary Guajuato:

When Guadalupe was thirteen, Fidencio, a man of thirty-two, broke into the house when her parents were away and carried her off at knife point. He lived on the other side of the street and had made advances to her ever since she was nine. He took her to a cave and raped her. She bled profusely and he brought her to his mother's house in Hidalgo. Guadalupe stayed in bed unattended for fifteen days until the hemorrhaging stopped. Her father found her and whipped her so badly she had to be in bed another two weeks. He told her he didn't like girls who were deflowered because they weren't "worth anything anymore," and he forced her to marry Fidencio in church.⁴⁷

Young boys were dragged into military service, sometimes by federal troops and sometimes by opposition forces. When not obligated to fight, they often became the sole supporters of their families as fathers and older brothers were pressed into service. Not surprisingly in this age of violence, many children of both sexes were orphaned when their parents became victims of the revolution.

Tragedies and responsibilities, therefore, were not new to adolescents. Already full participants in a Mexican family's social and economic well-being, older male teenagers were well prepared to contemplate a step as radical as leaving the village to migrate north. Many undoubtedly welcomed the chance to escape the drudgery, the violence, or the bore-

dom that had characterized their adolescence. Data from the sample of Los Angeles migrants indicates that 43.7 percent of the individuals who left Mexico between 1900 and 1930 crossed the border between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four (see Table 2).⁴⁸

The characteristics of the Mexican family are important to the history of immigration because the decision to send a member north was usually a family one. Many older sons sought extra income in Mexican urban centers, like the capital or Guadalajara, in the prosperous mines or agricultural fields of the northern states, or as track laborers in Mexico's growing railroad network. Others crossed the border to work in the mines, railroads, and agricultural fields of the American Southwest and sent earnings home. Manuel Gamio was able to trace the dynamics of Mexican immigration to the United States by analyzing money orders forwarded to families by immigrant wage earners in various parts of the United States. In July 1926 alone, 12,321 such orders were sent totaling 592,065 pesos (\$296,033), an average value of 48.05 pesos (\$24) per draft. The amounts ranged from 0.52 pesos (26 cents) to 207.25 pesos (\$103.63) per note. The money received was often used to purchase or to retain land under the threat of dispossession. Other families relied on the extra cash simply to survive the ravages of inflation, crop failure, or revolutionary destruction, all of which had rapidly decreased their purchasing power.⁴⁹

While many migrants were single, fathers also left their families and ventured north. The lack of elder sons or the economic strains placed upon newlyweds often made this decision necessary. In Arandas, Jalisco, Paul Taylor reported "prolonged separations of husbands and families, sometimes commencing almost immediately after marriage and lasting for years, and entailing emotional distress and other inevitable hardships." Though some wives and children were abandoned, Taylor found that the vast majority were supported by remittances from the emigrants.⁵⁰

Women rarely emigrated alone. Like most other immigrant groups in the United States, when women did migrate it was usually with other family members or to join a husband who had settled in the United States.⁵¹ Older daughters were expected to stay close to home until they married, so few were seen crossing the border by themselves. Villages throughout the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato had a comparatively high ratio of women to men, as husbands and brothers left for the United States or other parts of Mexico. According to the census of 1921, overall these three states had a female to male ratio of 106 to 100.⁵²

When individuals or families did decide to migrate directly to the United States from their villages in central Mexico (more will be said about this process in following chapters), they often had to overcome widespread negative attitudes toward the United States. One merchant-ranchero in Arandas told Taylor that "down in their hearts the Mexicans

do not like the Americans, collectively . . . the United States took more than half of this country [Texas, California, etc.]. But [with intense emotion] I tell you, it will be Mexico again, not now, but in hundreds, or a thousand years.⁵³ Another young man who was herding burros, when asked whether he was interested in migrating north, replied: "No, I don't wish to go; it is too far. This is *mi tierra*."⁵³

Given assurances that money could be made in the United States, however, many families facing economic uncertainty in Mexico chose to send family members north in hopes of improving their situation. Such a decision was surely made easier by the belief that the migration would be temporary. The same railroads which took migrants north could just as easily bring them back. Few saw their initial departure as permanent. Even during the revolution after 1910, most hoped that the end of hostilities would allow a return to Mexico.⁵⁴ Mexican immigrants did not find their life in the United States altogether foreign, for they usually traveled and worked in the American Southwest, a region that had once been part of Mexico and still retained a strong tradition of things Mexican. Moreover, they had the advantage that the two countries were contiguous. Working on the rail lines or in the agricultural fields with other Mexicans on the northern side of the border could not have appeared so very different from doing the same a little farther south.

After the first migrants left their communities, others contemplating migration to the United States saw the positive effect migration had on their own villages. Taylor reported that Mexican workers in the United States sent on the average 58,071 pesos (\$29,036) per year to Arandas, Jalisco, between 1922 and 1931 via postal money orders. In addition, almost 90 percent of the registered letters arriving from the United States contained either bank drafts or currency, and the amounts sent in this fashion were probably greater than the funds transferred in money orders. This extra cash was vital for temporarily raising the standard of living for Arandas families. While some were able to purchase land, others bought goods, including American-made radios or sewing machines, making their lives more comfortable. Undoubtedly, the economic distinction between families who could rely on this extra income and those who did not encouraged many to participate in the emigration process.⁵⁵

Not all of the ramifications were positive, however. Prolonged separation of husbands and wives heightened the chances of marital strife and infidelity, not to mention the possibility of permanent abandonment. Moreover, community life was affected by the absence of many of the most industrious young men from the village. Whether the departure of so many individuals made it more difficult for Mexico to recover from the ravages of war and advance into the twentieth century as a democratic nation has yet to be studied.

We must also remember that the vast majority of Mexicans did *not* migrate to the United States during this era. Even the highest estimates of migratory behavior indicate that 90 percent of Mexico's population

did not leave Mexico. Most Mexican migrants opted to improve their family's situation by trying their luck in Mexican cities and larger towns. Arandas sent large numbers of migrants to Guadalajara, Leon, Piedra Gorda, La Piedad, Pénjamo, Guanajuato, Atotonilco, Venta del Astillero, Hacienda del Plan, and Zapopan.⁵⁶ Mexico City grew tremendously during the early twentieth century as a result of internal migration from villages throughout central Mexico. Still others went north to Torreón, Monterrey, Chihuahua, or Ciudad Juárez without ever deciding to cross the border.

Many remained in their native villages and weathered whatever storms approached. For better or for worse, village culture in Mexico was rapidly changing during the Porfirian and revolutionary periods. Few areas remained isolated from the social and economic pressures altering the countryside. Sometimes the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness created by such a transformation found its expression in the subconscious of those who were left behind. One man's dream in a small village in Morelos eloquently reveals the inner struggles which change posed for him and his neighbors: "I dreamt that I was in bed in my house with all my family, all in bed, when I saw a train, an engine that came over all of us. On seeing the engine, I jumped from the bed, yelling to the one driving that he stop his machine and not crush us all."⁵⁷ Though this man remained in Mexico, others elected to migrate to the United States and confront the challenges associated with emigration. Yet what would become of them as they ventured northward could only dimly be imagined.

- send family north to improve situation

- temporary migration

- American Southwest resembles Mexico

- Absence of men

- family separation

internal migration

90% did not leave

were directed against individuals who had deep roots in the region, many of whom had crossed countless times before. Though Mexicans knew that they would have to come to terms with the new reality, the irony of history was surely not lost on them. They were now interlopers on familiar land, even as their labor became increasingly crucial to its economic development and they had begun to settle their families in the United States. Mexican immigrants learned to live with the contradiction, partly because they continued to feel wholly Mexican, but mostly because they could do little to change their lot.

feel wholly Mexican
interlopers on their own
land

CHAPTER 3

Newcomers in the City of the Angels

Like that of many other Mexican immigrants, Zeferino Velázquez's path to Los Angeles was circuitous. Arriving in the city for the first time in 1919 at the age of twenty-five, Velázquez, a native of León, Guanajuato, had already been in the country for eight years. Similar to many other young men who crossed the border in the early twentieth century, the railroad, family contacts, and sustained geographic mobility characterized Velázquez's entry into American society. In 1911 he and his brother-in-law had crossed over from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, where they had immediately contracted themselves for railroad work in Kansas. Finding work on the railroads too arduous, Velázquez next obtained a job in a Kansas City packing house. Here, he was able to impress his foreman and secure a modest raise. Perhaps it was this modicum of financial security that enabled him to marry a Mexican immigrant woman from La Piedad, Michoacán. In Kansas City, all seemed to be going well for Velázquez, whose story began as one of traditional immigrant social mobility.

Within a year, however, Velázquez's wife had died, leaving him with an infant son. Moreover, Velázquez himself had recently broken a leg at the packing plant, and was unable to collect any compensation for the damage. To add insult to injury, American officials in Kansas began pressuring him to enlist in the army, now mobilized as a result of World War I. Yet Velázquez had carefully maintained his Mexican citizenship. To avoid Kansas draft officials, he fled to California. There he secured work as an agricultural laborer for Japanese farmers in the Imperial Valley. In 1918, he returned briefly to Juárez to help his father, his sister, and her children move to the United States. By the end of that cotton picking season, the Velázquez clan, working as an economic unit, managed to save enough money to settle in Los Angeles.

Once in his new home in the Lincoln Heights barrio, Velázquez took a job as a laborer with the Los Angeles Paper Manufacturing Com-

Table 7. Migration Patterns of Adult Male Migrants to Los Angeles

Time from border crossing to L.A. residence	Decade of L.A. migration				Total	
	Before 1910	1910s	1920s	1930s	Number	Percent
Direct to L.A. (0 to 3 mos)	40.0	18.7	13.9	2.4	126	15.2
3 mos. to 1 year	13.3	6.2	8.4	7.3	67	8.1
1 to 3 years	16.7	16.1	12.7	7.3	108	13.3
3 to 5 years	3.3	13.7	11.6	7.3	95	11.5
5 to 10 years	13.3	23.6	24.0	31.7	198	23.9
10 to 15 years	10.0	13.0	12.2	26.8	108	13.0
15 to 20 years	0.0	2.5	6.9	12.2	50	6.0
20 to 25 years	0.0	1.2	5.7	2.4	37	4.5
25 to 30 years	0.0	0.6	2.2	2.4	15	1.8
Over 30 years	0.0	0.6	1.5	0.0	10	1.2
Unknown	3.3	3.7	1.0	0.0	13	1.6
Total	30	161	597	41	829	—

Source: Naturalization Records, RG 21, NA—Laguna Niguel, California.

Note: Numbers from the years before 1910 and after 1930 are too small to reach reliable conclusions about migration patterns in those periods.

pany. When employment in the city was irregular or his pay was cut, he continued to do agricultural work in the Imperial Valley. In the 1920s alone, Velázquez worked as a lemon picker, an independent vegetable planter, a sharecropper, and a gardener in Beverly Hills. He eventually remarried after 1920 to a woman from San Francisco del Rincón, Guanajuato, who he had met while working in the Imperial Valley. Although he worked consistently during the decade between 1920 and 1930, Velázquez was fired at least once in the mid-1920s on the grounds that he was not an American citizen.¹

Velázquez's geographic mobility and variable work patterns were typical of the vast majority of Mexican immigrants who found themselves in Los Angeles during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Data taken from naturalization records of 829 adult male Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles indicates that only 15 percent came directly to the city after crossing the border (see Table 7). In fact, the majority did not arrive in Los Angeles until they had lived five or more years in other parts of the United States.² Thus, most Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles had initial experiences with American life elsewhere.

This chapter will explore the complicated patterns by which Mexican migrants arrived in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. Unlike foreign newcomers to other parts of the United States, Mexicans who settled in Los Angeles were often seasoned sojourners who chose this city after careful exploration of other options. The opportunity and attraction that Los Angeles held out for these newcomers, however, was

tempered by the reality of life for Mexicans living in the city. Poor housing options and unhealthy living conditions were as much a part of Mexican life in the city as other more favorable conditions. The establishment of fresh Mexican communities within the Los Angeles area, as this account will reveal, created new foundations for an emerging Mexican American culture.

Given the regional settlement patterns in Mexico and the pattern of railroad routes bringing migrants north, few Mexicans crossed into the United States at the California border. The available naturalization records indicate that less than 7 percent of migrants who eventually made their way to Los Angeles first arrived in the United States via the land ports of Calexico and San Ysidro, or the sea ports of San Diego and San Francisco. The overwhelming majority entered through Arizona or Texas, with El Paso serving as the port of entry for close to 60 percent of all immigrants who eventually settled in Los Angeles.³

Since immigrant workers were concerned primarily with finding work, the geographic location of such jobs was only of secondary interest. Most first chose to settle in the area immediately adjacent to their crossing, unless recruited by labor contractors who transported them to other parts of the United States. According to a fact-finding committee commissioned by Governor C. C. Young of California in the late 1920s, between 64 and 84 percent of Mexican immigrants arriving in the United States from 1909 to 1926 had originally declared Texas to be their state of "intended future permanent residence." Only 3.8 percent of the immigrants admitted in the three-year period from 1909 to 1911 declared California, although by 1924–26 that figure had risen to 17 percent.⁴

Many of those who crossed at El Paso made that city their initial home. Each of the eight railroad lines which passed through town had set up El Paso maintenance shops employing hundreds of Mexican workers. Others labored in industries linked to the extraction of metal ores, sometimes working for the largest employer of Mexicans in the city, the El Paso Smelter. El Paso's growth as a commercial and transportation center also led to jobs in construction and commerce, and the city's Mexican population approached 40,000 by 1920. Yet proximity to the border and the ever present flow of newcomers kept competition for employment high and wages relatively low. But given El Paso's role as a railroad terminus, it was relatively easy for workers to head elsewhere when economic conditions turned sour.⁵

In the same manner that El Paso served as a hub for the transportation and mining industries of the surrounding region, San Antonio became a major agricultural and cattle-raising axis for south and central Texas. The largest city in Texas in 1900, San Antonio contained the largest number of Mexican residents in the Southwest in 1920—nearly 41,500. The building of military bases around the city during World War I created many new opportunities in construction, maintenance, and

military bases

Table 8. Previous U.S. Residence of Adult Male Migrants to Los Angeles

Previous U.S. residence	Decade of L.A. migration				Total	
	Before 1910	1910s	1920s	1930s	Number	Percent
Direct to L.A.	40.0	18.7	13.9	2.4	126	15.2
Other California	6.7	4.3	5.2	12.2	45	5.4
Arizona	16.7	18.7	21.3	29.3	174	21.0
New Mexico	3.3	0.6	1.8	2.4	14	1.7
Texas	30.0	51.6	54.4	48.8	437	52.7
New York	0.0	1.2	0.8	0.0	7	0.8
Colorado	0.0	0.6	0.5	0.0	4	0.5
Louisiana	0.0	0.6	0.4	0.0	3	0.4
Other states *	0.0	0.0	0.7	4.9	6	0.7
Unknown	3.3	3.7	1.0	0.0	13	1.6
Total	30	161	597	41	829	—

Source: Naturalization Records, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

* Includes states of Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Nevada, Washington, and Wyoming.

transportation. Additionally, the entire region of south Texas developed rapidly as an agricultural area, requiring a large migrant labor force. Yet along with jobs picking cotton or harvesting foodstuffs came intense racial discrimination and strict segregation. Moreover, when a Mexican picker received a daily wage of \$1.75 for working Texas cotton, but could get up to \$2.75 in Arizona or \$3.25 in California, farmers had trouble keeping their work force. In fact, growers in this region went so far as to try to prevent Mexican laborers from purchasing automobiles and prohibiting out-of-state labor recruiters in order to keep their workers both plentiful and immobile.⁶

In spite of these efforts, both San Antonio and El Paso served as primary labor markets where recruiters from companies located coast to coast ventured to find able-bodied men and, to a lesser extent, entire families. Because of their proximity to the border, many immigrants maintained family members in these cities, while working part of the year in the steel mills of Indiana, the auto plants of Michigan, or the agricultural fields of Kansas and Colorado. Because these cities served as labor "clearing houses," both exhibited an imbalance in the ratio of Mexican men to women. In 1930, for example, there were 86 men to every 100 women in El Paso, and 95 to 100 in San Antonio. Only these two cities in the entire United States experienced this demographic phenomenon.⁷ Given the unique geographic considerations and the mobile nature of Mexican immigrant society, it is no wonder that most Mexicans who eventually arrived in Los Angeles had first spent time living in Texas (see Table 8).

Two other areas were starting points for a substantial group of Mexican migrants to Los Angeles. Nogales, along with the smaller towns of

Naco and Douglas, served as entry points into the state of Arizona, especially for immigrants from the neighboring state of Sonora and other areas along Mexico's west coast. From here, many sought employment in the mines at Bisbee and Morenci or in the agricultural fields of the Salt River Valley. Arizona cotton growers banded together to recruit labor directly from Mexico, sometimes moving whole families in special trains financed by the growers. According to local studies, Mexicans made up 60 percent of Arizona's smelter workers in 1911 and 43 percent of its copper miners in 1927, and they continued to work in the mining industry in large numbers though they consistently received lower wages than Anglos. The same situation prevailed for their counterparts working in the fields. However, only a short train ride away, Los Angeles beckoned seductively to those who hoped to find better jobs and higher wages.⁸

Newcomers to Los Angeles also came from other parts of California. Though a few moved from San Francisco or San Diego, most in-state migrants came from rural areas, particularly the newly fertile Imperial Valley. Like the Rio Grande Valley, the Winter Garden area of Texas, and Arizona's Salt River Valley, the growth of this major agricultural region of California was directly linked to the development of an irrigation system which allowed large farms to develop out of desert lands. Beginning with the federal Reclamation Act of 1902, combinations of private entrepreneurs and public monies brought water to the Imperial Valley region, turning the huge arid area near the Mexican border into 120,000 acres of intensive crop farms—dubbed by one historian an "immense garden."⁹ Most large-scale farmers in the southern half of the state recruited Mexican laborers. By the late 1920s, one-third of the labor force of the Imperial Valley was of Mexican origin, and a study conducted in 1928 found that over 55 percent of the farms over 80 acres preferred Mexican laborers over all others. Also spreading northward into the San Joaquin Valley, Mexicans formed the largest single ethnic group among farm workers in California as early as 1920.⁹

This migratory pattern of Mexican immigrants eventually led to employment less mobile but more varied which a city like Los Angeles could provide. Railroad work, done by maintenance or construction gangs in outlying areas, often led to Los Angeles, a major depot with large facilities for railroad repair and maintenance located near the downtown area. Often migrants took advantage of the free travel offered by the railroads to newly hired laborers assigned to distant work sites, only to jump off trains when their destinations were reached. One observer claimed that the loss of workers in every shipment of railroad laborers was close to 50 percent. Backbreaking mine work or migratory agricultural labor often followed, with the ambitious always looking for better-paying jobs. After several years' experience in America's migratory labor market, punctuated by occasional trips to Mexico to rejoin family, those immigrants searching for more stability, greater opportunities for em-

Water
comes
to
Imperial
Valley

ployment, and a more congenial atmosphere increasingly looked to the urban areas of the Southwest and, to a lesser extent, the cities in the Midwest. After World War I, Los Angeles appeared to offer migrants much of what they desired.¹⁰

As discussed in the last chapter, changes in immigration laws and procedures after 1917 also pressured migrants to settle down in the United States. Once the literacy test and an eight-dollar fee for crossing the border was put into effect, many more laborers chose not to return home for the winter months. Even though exemptions were plentiful at the border for unskilled workers, bureaucratic delays or red tape could detain laborers in Juárez for as many as fifteen days. These delays are away at hard-earned savings because Mexicans had to pay the daily three pesos for board and lodgings, expenses usually covered by labor agencies or the railroads. Moreover, when returnees brought other family members with them, numerous complications could arise, especially if someone in the group became ill. In addition, each child under sixteen was charged a \$10 visa fee. The unintended consequences of policies designed to make immigration more difficult were to encourage those already in the country to stay, thus transforming what had been a two-way process into a one-way migration. The result was an increase in the total population of Mexican immigrants in the United States.¹¹

Los Angeles, of course, possessed an affable climate and a growing community of Mexicans, a fact that made the city an excellent alternative to home. Moreover, labor agencies and contractors were well established in the area by the 1920s, so that agricultural employers and the railroads were no longer compelled to recruit their workers directly from the border. Railroads, in particular, began to curtail recruitment in El Paso in favor of cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Kansas City. To insure a consistent and plentiful labor supply, California agricultural interests also began to develop relationships with recruiters in Los Angeles. Employers as far away as Salt Lake City and Ogden, Utah, centered their recruitment efforts in Los Angeles.¹²

Moreover, the movement of Mexicans into Los Angeles from agricultural areas did not necessarily mean a change of occupation. Agriculture remained one of Los Angeles County's principal industries well into the 1930s. In 1938, for example, agricultural production in Los Angeles County topped \$75 million, compared with less than \$24 million in Imperial and Orange counties. In the World War I era, bean fields still dotted the west side of the city on both sides of Wilshire Boulevard, as did celery fields in Culver City and acres of vegetable farms in the South Bay region. Citrus groves would continue to dominate the neighboring counties of Orange and Riverside well into the post-World War II era. For many Mexican residents of Los Angeles, agricultural labor proved to be an important first job in the area, and for others was combined with industrial labor to provide a year-round income.¹³

Many farmworkers in the 1910s and 1920s could live in the city and

take Red Line train cars to work in the fields. The Pacific Electric interurban railway network, an empire carefully constructed and developed by Henry Huntington, had grown to cover more than a thousand miles by 1913, stretching as far north as San Fernando, east to Riverside, south to Newport Beach, and west to the ocean. As Anglo Americans in the 1920s became more and more wedded to the private automobile, Mexicans and other ethnic minorities in the city remained heavy users of public transportation. For Mexicans accustomed to relying on the railroad for movement across the southwest, these commuter lines put more control and flexibility into the hands of residents to pursue diverse work opportunities. The combination of this public transportation network and the diverse regional economy made the city an effective base from which to engage in farm labor for a significant portion of the year.¹⁴

Mexicans in Los Angeles, particularly those with a few years' experience, gained considerable knowledge about the regional labor market and used this knowledge to their economic advantage. Having alternative employment opportunities beyond those offered by a labor recruiter allowed many workers to avoid the most exploitative arrangements. As one recruiter lamented: "I get tired of hearing that twenty-nine cents is 'my barato' [too cheap]."¹⁵ This gradual change in attitude also contributed to an increasing recruitment of new laborers directly from Mexico, since the more seasoned workers scorned the most unpleasant positions. The stereotype of the "lazy Mexican" was thus reshaped to account for laborers unwilling to take just any offer of work, no matter how underpaid or dangerous. As one frustrated Los Angeles labor recruiter put it:

The men fresh from Old Mexico are decidedly better. After they have loafed around here and had charity they won't stay out at Kingman, Arizona, and they aren't worth a damn. The man who comes fresh from Old Mexico finds that anything he gets is better than what he had. He finds in L.A. he can get free food and he sees Mexicans who are better off than he is. They get spoiled.¹⁶

Another reason that migrants chose Los Angeles as a more permanent home was that it contained a large, growing Mexican community. Since the nineteenth century, the city had a longstanding tradition of influence among California's Mexican communities. Yet Mexican-born immigrants had little contact with long-term, native-born Californios. The most obvious reason for this lack of contact between older and newer groups of Mexicans is that few longstanding Spanish-speaking residents of Los Angeles were present in the city to welcome newcomers and to aid in their adjustment. Historians who have written about Mexicans during this period in Los Angeles have noted that residential instability, rather than persistence, characterized Mexican Los Angeles in the second half of the 1800s. Richard Griswold del Castillo, in his work on nineteenth-century origins of Los Angeles' Mexican barrio, found that only twelve heads of households who lived in the city in 1844 remained

1920s
Mexico
want
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job

there in 1880. He concluded that "migration was a main source of population change." In fact, he estimated that more than 90 percent of the total Mexican population of Los Angeles in 1880 had migrated there after the Mexican War of 1848. Not surprisingly, this rate of transiency is extremely high when compared with other cities in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

The pattern continued into the twentieth century. Pedro G. Castillo, in his analysis of Los Angeles city directories, identified a persistence rate for Mexicans of 31 percent from 1900 to 1910 and 29 percent for the period between 1910 and 1920. Ricardo Romo found a similar rate for Mexicanos in Los Angeles (29.4%) for the period between 1918 and 1928. This figure may be compared with persistence rates for the general Los Angeles population of around 50 percent per decade. Stephen Thernstrom also found consistent rates of between 50 and 60 percent for five other cities—Boston, Omaha, San Francisco, Norristown, Pennsylvania, and Waltham, Massachusetts.¹⁸ With residents moving out and newcomers moving in, the Los Angeles Mexican community was consistently dominated by successive waves of immigrants from Mexico. As early as 1910, Mexican-born residents outnumbered American-born citizens of Mexican descent in Los Angeles. By 1920, the ratio of foreign-born immigrants to native-born Mexicans was approximately 2 to 1. Ten years later, five times as many Mexican families in Los Angeles were headed by foreign-born heads than by individuals born in the United States.¹⁹

Those Californios who did remain in the southern California area often lived at a distance from the newly arrived Mexican immigrant settlements in central and east Los Angeles. Most who could afford to do so moved to the Anglo-dominated west side of the city where they were completely isolated from the growing Mexican community in the central city and east of the river. One list of California "pioneers" gathered by the Circulo Mexicano, a nationalist organization of the World War II era, listed 41 individuals living in West Adams, Brentwood Heights, Hancock Park, and Hollywood, with only three in the downtown area and one living east of the river in San Gabriel. Even Leo Carrillo, born in the Plaza area in 1880, was more likely to mention contact with Chinese residents than Mexican immigrants in his autobiography. Moving to Santa Monica with his family as a youngster, Carrillo rarely had any contact with newly arrived Mexicans to California after 1900, except for the occasional vaquero he encountered at farflung ranches. The few families who remained in the downtown area so fully assimilated into the Mexican immigrant community through marriage that they became largely indistinguishable for the newly arrived.²⁰

To compound the demographic change and geographic isolation, Anglos distorted the Spanish and Mexican past of Los Angeles by developing a romanticized version of local history and the idea that nineteenth-century Mexican/Spanish California was a lost civilization. Beginning in the late 1880s, Los Angeles promoters cultivated an image of

southern California as a simple, pastoral society. The "mission myth," as it has been called, was intended to attract tourists and settlers. As Charles Fletcher Lummis, the city's leading publicist, pointed out, "the Missions are, next to our climate and its consequences, the best capital Southern California has." Thus, this romanticized Spanish past of California, best symbolized by the restoration of Franciscan missions and the novel *Ramona*, written by easterner Helen Hunt Jackson and published in 1886, served to distort the highly stratified Spanish reign in the region. In addition, it totally glossed over the Mexican heritage and influence in the region, and the clash of cultures between Mexicans and Americans in the state. By depicting the city's Latino heritage as a quaint, but altogether disappearing element in Los Angeles culture, city officials inflicted a particular kind of obscurity onto Mexican descendants of that era by appropriating and then commercializing their history.²¹

It is not surprising that the native-born Californio element would be subsumed in the newly emerging collective consciousness of Los Angeles residents around the turn of the century. Beginning in 1880, southern California underwent what one historian has called "the most extended period of sustained growth ever experienced by any equally compact region of the United States." The demographic consequences of this growth were staggering throughout the period from 1880 to 1930. During the first six years of the new century, for example, the population of the City of Los Angeles alone jumped from 100,000 to 250,000. In the twenty-year period ending in 1930, Los Angeles grew at a rate never matched by any other American metropolis; it quadrupled its population from 319,000 to 1.24 million.²² What was left of California's nineteenth-century Mexican life and culture was completely transformed in the face of rapid American settlement and urbanization.

By the turn of the century, the native-born element in the population had been reduced to a relatively insignificant constituency in the life of the metropolis. Thus, even though the social position of twentieth-century Mexican immigrants had been foreshadowed by that of their nineteenth-century predecessors, most newcomers remained oblivious to a fact largely irrelevant to their current predicament. Yet remnants of the Californio heyday remained tucked away in the Mexican community in the core area of the burgeoning city.

The most important of these landmarks was the central plaza of Los Angeles itself. Since its founding in 1781, the Plaza of *La Reyna de Los Angeles* ("The Queen of Angels") had served as the central gathering place for the Mexican community.²³ After being settled in its present location in the early 1820s, distinguished Californio families—like those of José Antonio Carrillo, Pío Pico, Ygnacio del Valle, and Vicente Lugo—built town houses around the square. Dominated by the Plaza Church, this communal space witnessed countless religious ceremonies, bullfights, and political spectacles.

After the American takeover in 1847, the Plaza took on a less sancti-

4
pop,
urban

fied aura, as early gold seekers turned the streets around the courtyard into dens of gambling, vice, and crime. Anglo Americans nicknamed the Plaza area "Sonoratown," in mock imitation of the birthplace of a large group of Mexican miners who resettled there after being forced to leave the northern California gold fields during the early 1850s. Town houses originally built by the elite Californios passed into the hands of Anglos in the 1860s, while a burgeoning Chinatown on the one hand, and purveyors of vice on the other, established footholds in surrounding buildings. Despite such changes, a few residents waged a continuous battle to preserve the integrity of the Plaza. Pío Pico, the last governor of Mexican California, for example, returned in 1869 to construct the city's most opulent hotel in one corner of the area. But his efforts eventually were thwarted. By the time Pico died—in near poverty—in 1894, the Plaza area had fallen into disrepair.

During the 1890s, the Plaza was used as a wholesale market for growers of vegetables and fruits, and once again became a functioning part of the economic life of the city. In this form it was a familiar sight to Mexican immigrants, who often came from Mexican communities where goods were traded in a central plaza area. But tellingly, Charles F. Lummis and his Landmarks Club spearheaded efforts to prevent the Plaza from being used in such a practical fashion. Foreshadowing the Plaza's tourist-oriented future, Lummis argued that a crass display of commercial trading belittled the mythic and symbolic role that the Plaza held for Anglo Los Angeles.²⁴

As the city grew, the social, business, and cultural center of Los Angeles moved away from the Plaza area in a southward and westward direction. City Hall, built in the late 1920s, served as the centerpiece for the surrounding civic center that emerged a short distance south. Further to the south, Los Angeles' embryonic manufacturing center took hold and crowded out residential neighborhoods. Institutions springing up along Wilshire Boulevard increasingly transferred financial power west. The significant migration of newcomers from other parts of the United States began to fill out the entire Los Angeles basin, creating various regional centers and suburbs that decreased the need for any one central focus to southern California society.

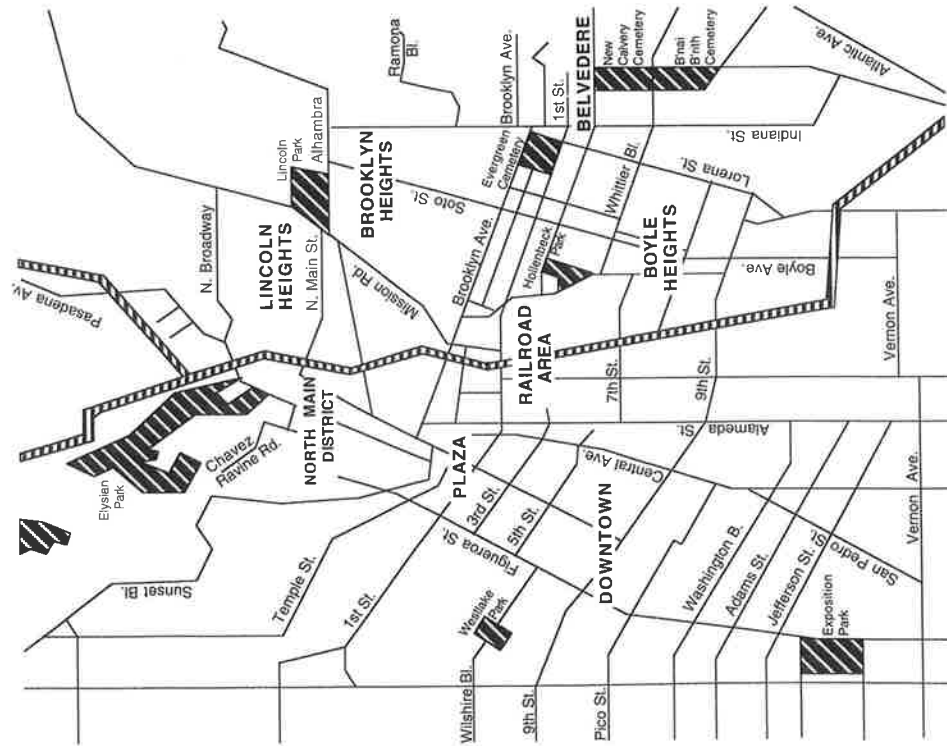
Increasingly isolated from the rest of the city, the Plaza area provided shabby but welcome living quarters for many newcomers. Most migrants from Mexico first settled in and around the area prior to World War I, but the Plaza also attracted large numbers of other foreign-born, especially immigrants from Europe. Over twenty different ethnic groups were represented in the Plaza community, with Mexicans and Italians accounting for over three-fourths of the total.²⁵ This part of town had emerged in the late nineteenth century as Los Angeles' immigrant quarter, and it continued to serve such a function during the early twentieth century. After 1910, however, the needs of Los Angeles' industrial employers required more cheap immigrant workers than could be housed in the Plaza



Map 4 Mexican Residences in East/Central Los Angeles, 1920-1940
Source: Naturalization Documents, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

area alone. As native-born Anglo Americans increasingly settled in the expansive western parts of the city between downtown and the Pacific Ocean, immigrants were left to settle the eastern fringe as well as communities directly to the north and south of the Plaza.

Map 4 indicates just how widespread Mexican settlement in Los Angeles was in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Mexicans lived in almost every part of the city, with close to 20 percent living beyond the east and central region shown. Though there was a significant community of Mexicans in the Watts area to the south, others were



Map 5 Neighborhoods in East/Central Los Angeles, 1920-1940

spread out to the west and south in areas mostly populated by Anglo Americans. By and large, however, the largest concentrations of Mexicans were in the Plaza area, directly to the east of the Los Angeles River, in Boyle Heights, and outside the city limits in Belvedere. Other, less concentrated settlements existed in the North Main Street district, around Elysian Park, in Lincoln Heights, and between Main Street and Central Avenue south of downtown (see Map 5 for neighborhoods).

In almost every section of Los Angeles where Mexicans lived, they shared neighborhoods with other ethnic groups. The Plaza vicinity, of course, was home to many different groups, and included Chinatown and Little Tokyo, the main Japanese community. Along the river, in an

area adjacent to the Plaza area and dominated by the city's railroad repair and maintenance yards, lived other Asian immigrants, together with the largest Russian colony in Los Angeles, mostly members of the Molokan sect. Farther east in Boyle Heights, the center of the Jewish community developed along Brooklyn Avenue. At least one-third of the Jews in Los Angeles lived there during the 1920s. By 1930, nearly 10,000 Jewish households could be found in the area. Additionally, a small African American community settled in Boyle Heights, directly west of Evergreen Cemetery.

North of Brooklyn Avenue, a more prosperous and religiously orthodox Jewish section emerged in City Terrace. In other adjacent areas such as Brooklyn Heights, Jews, together with working-class Anglo Americans, formed the large majority of the population. But a smattering of Mexicans lived here, too. Farther north in Lincoln Heights, and west of the river in the North Main district, Mexicans and Italians were the two main ethnic groups, with immigrants from Italy more dominant the farther east from the river one traveled.

The most ethnically diverse communities in Los Angeles were located south of the Plaza. In the 1920s about 40 percent of the small African American community in the city lived along Central Avenue, an area that later in the century contained the largest black population in the western United States. Many of these migrants from the South replaced an earlier generation of Jewish migrants who had lived in the area. Between Main Street and Central Avenue could be found a foreign-born population so mixed that it was difficult to claim the domination of any one group.²⁶ In 1926, the *Christian Advocate* printed a diagram of a city block in this area to demonstrate its ethnic complexity (see Figure 1). In his attempt to raise funds for the local Church of All Nations, Methodist minister G. Bromley Oxnam, the author of the accompanying article, was able to highlight graphically the diversity of Los Angeles during the 1920s.²⁷

For Mexicans in the 1920s, Belvedere, located east of the city limits past Indiana Street, represented an extreme contrast to these mixed neighborhoods. They had begun to move to Belvedere during the late 1910s because housing was cheaper than within the city limits. There they mixed with native white residents and European immigrants. In the early 1920s, the interurban railway system completed a Belvedere line that made movement into the city for employment relatively fast and inexpensive. And by 1930, the area had developed into a community dominated by twenty to thirty thousand Mexican residents, by far the largest single concentration of Mexicans in the Los Angeles basin. Alone, it accounted for as many Mexicans as Chicago or Laredo, Texas, making Belvedere the fifth largest Mexican urban community in the nation. Out of 10 public schools in Los Angeles reportedly having over 90 percent Mexican enrollment in the school year 1927-28, six were located in Belvedere.²⁸

---THE NAME OF THIS STREET WILL BE FURNISHED UPON APPLICATION AT OUR OFFICE---

---STREET---

513	5 Spanish
515	4 Americans
518	2 Swedes
521	1 English/1 German/2 Americans
523	1 Hollander/Bal. Americans
602	1 Spanish/4 Portugese
606	Turks-Jews
612	2 Danish/1 Armenian/Bal. Americans
614	American
616	Greek
618	Lithuanians
620	Turks-Jews
630	
651	Americans
632	
633	5 Spanish
634	4 Americans
635	
636	Russian-Jews
638	Hungarians
640	French
642	
646	
648	American (?)
650	Spanish

---STREET---

A TYPICAL SECTION AREA FOR CHURCH-OF-ALL-NATIONS LOS ANGELES, CAL.

Figure 1 City Block in All Nations Church Neighborhood
Source: G. Bromley Oxnam, "Los Angeles: A City of Many Nations," *California Christian Advocate*, 18 February 1926, p. 14.

The most striking aspect of Mexican residential distribution in Los Angeles between 1900 and 1940, however, was not intense segregation; rather, it was the widespread dispersal of Mexican homes throughout central and eastern Los Angeles. As the future head of Los Angeles' Housing Commission observed in 1912, "there is no spot which we can call 'Mexican Villa' or 'Little Mexico.'"²⁹ Instead, the incoming native-

born Anglo American population did its best to separate itself from all immigrants and ethnics by settling on the west side, leaving downtown and East Los Angeles to the foreign-born and blacks. Since Mexicans were the largest immigrant group in the city, they naturally made up significant portions of many of these communities. Most districts in this part of the city contained between 20 and 40 percent Mexican residents, with the area immediately surrounding the Plaza housing around 60 percent.³⁰

This is not to say that racial restriction was not prevalent in Los Angeles in the interwar period; rather, this period saw the widespread use of racially restrictive covenants by real estate brokers and owners intent on keeping "undesirables" out of Anglo American Protestant communities. The "undesirables," however, included not only Mexicans but also African Americans, Asian Americans, Jews, and, at times, other foreign-born. Those intent on keeping the "others" out of their communities cared little about how these ethnics distributed themselves in central or east Los Angeles. Because of the boom nature of Los Angeles' growth in this period and the immense migration of a working population to fill the demand for cheap labor, ethnic intermixing characterized most, but not all, central and east-side communities. Rather than "a group tightly clustered residentially and socially," the Mexican community would remain a settlement of scattered communities until the demographic changes of the post-World War II era created one cohesive east-side barrio.³¹

This situation was unique in the history of Los Angeles. In the nineteenth century, Mexican residents had been increasingly segregated into the Plaza area and the southern part of the city. Barrioization had pushed nearly 70 percent of the Mexican population into these two regions by 1880, leading one historian to describe the barrio as "a well-defined enclave within the heart of the city surrounded by Anglo suburbs."³² After 1940, segregation of Mexicans once again increased as European ethnics moved out of East Los Angeles and immigrants from Mexico took their place. By 1960, residential segregation was significantly higher than it had been in 1880.³³ In between these two periods, however, the rapid transformation of the Los Angeles economy, coupled with competition with European, African American, and Asian newcomers for housing and employment, reduced strict racial segregation. Instead, class-stratified Los Angeles exhibited a rigid residential separation between its core and eastern regions and the rest of the city. The East Los Angeles "barrio" never had a more heterogeneous ethnic population than it contained during the first forty years of the twentieth century.³⁴

Moreover, the rapid development and geographic mobility characteristic of Los Angeles during the early twentieth century meant that most communities underwent residential transformation continuously. The area south of downtown where the All Nations Church was located, for example, had no sooner become an ethnically mixed neighborhood in

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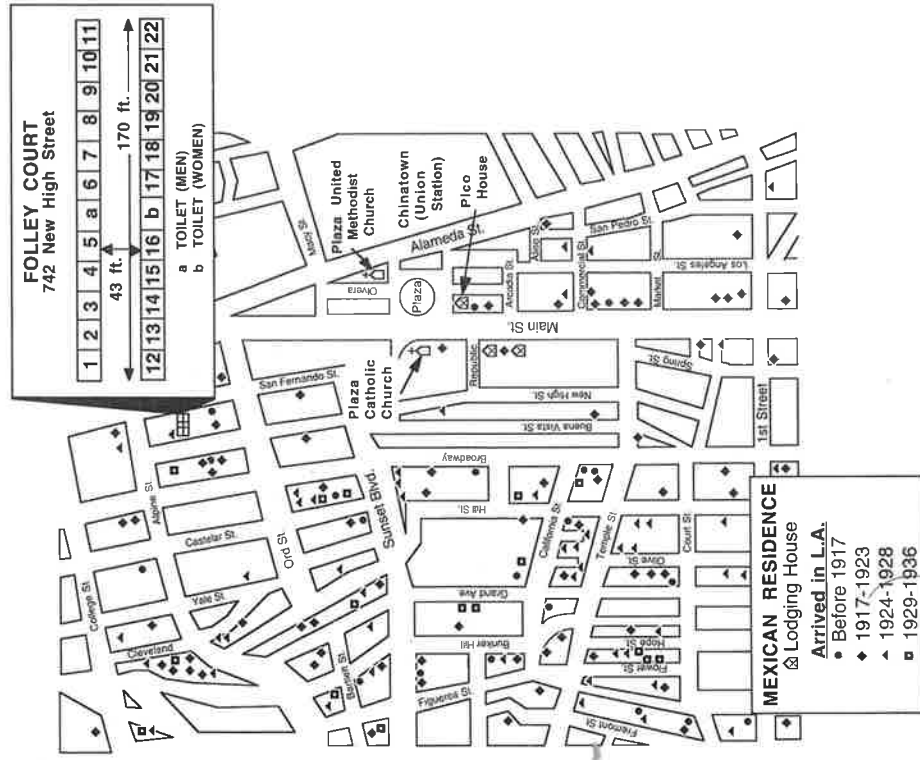
lot
-greg
but
separated

the 1920s when it was rezoned to make way for a manufacturing and retail district. Farther east outside the city limits, new meat packing, steel, and auto assembly plants eventually persuaded laborers to move out to Belvedere and other areas on the eastern fringe. The development of the city's civic center and the building of Union Station railroad terminal led to high rents which pushed residents out of the Plaza area. Like other working-class ethnics in Los Angeles, Mexicans could hardly settle down permanently in a community when control of their neighborhoods was firmly entrenched in the hands of Anglo American industrial and commercial interests. The residential preferences of immigrants were always tempered by the zoning practices and labor needs of the city's establishment.³⁵

If measured in terms of housing conditions and health, the quality of life in this area of Los Angeles was generally poor. Most Mexican immigrants adapted as best they could given the poor conditions and the limited variety of housing arrangements. Single men, for example, often opted first to reside in the cheap lodging houses of the Plaza district upon arriving in the city. In 1914, rooms, often subdivided by board partitions, went for 20 cents a night. More common was the renting of a single bed, which could be had for 10 to 15 cents. In one house, 32 beds were spread about in one large room. Some houses contained stools or stands as furniture, while others consisted of only beds. Usually, one or two toilets, a wash bowl, and a tub were the only conveniences provided for upward of thirty or forty men.³⁶

The house court, another alternative, was often one of the only possibilities available for newly arrived families. Some of the poorest of these residences were dubbed "cholo courts" because of the dominance of Mexican residents. These became the primary targets for investigation by the Los Angeles City Housing Commission, created in 1906. Although the city had few East Coast-style tenements, Jacob Riis compared such quarters to the worst of New York City. Barrack-like structures with thin walls separating each family, they were likened by one observer to "stalls for cattle instead of homes for human beings." Tenants shared outside toilets, water was obtained from outdoor faucets, and bathing facilities were rarely supplied. In 1912, the City Housing Commission found that in the most common house court habitation, a family of four shared two rooms, one for cooking and the other for sleeping. Most of the furniture consisted of boxes. Rents ranged from \$3 to \$16 per month, roughly one-fourth of the monthly income of the average family.³⁷

A house court located at 742 New High Street just north of the Plaza (see Map 6) provides a perspective on housing conditions typical in the area at the time. According to a survey conducted in 1914, Folley Court extended from New High Street through to San Fernando Street, measuring a total of 170 by 44 feet. Filling this space were two long rows of habitations, each 12 by 15 feet with a doorway cut through a partition to separate a five-foot-wide kitchen from the rest of the room.



Map 6 Mexican Residences in the Plaza Area

Source: Naturalization Documents, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

At least fifty-five people living in the house court shared three toilets each for men and women, along with ten hydrants with sinks. Families of three to six people filled each of the nineteen occupied habitations.

The men living in Folley Court earned from \$1.50 to \$2.50 a day in railroad work, cement construction, bricklaying, or other common labor. Six had been in Los Angeles less than two years, although eleven spoke some English. Most residents had migrated to Los Angeles in the past five years from other parts of the United States, with many having lived in the north for some time. One family, consisting of a husband and wife and their three sons, had been in the United States for four

years. Their meager furniture consisted of a bed and a small cot, a battered dresser, a stove, and a dry goods box nailed to a corner containing a few dishes and cups. Refuse lumber from a recent neighborhood fire was piled up outside the door on the muddy dirt ground.³⁸

Other families took advantage of housing provided by their employers. The railroad companies, in particular, constructed and managed some of the most deplorable housing in the area. The Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe, and the Salt Lake railroads, along with the Pacific Electric interurban railway system, all owned house courts, small shacks, boxcars, and empty lots for their employees. This "generosity" came at a price, however. Workers for these companies were customarily paid as little as \$1.25 a day, although they received this housing free of charge. In effect, employers were charging a 50 cents per day rental fee for space in these dilapidated section camps by reducing their employees' wages. The railroad companies made substantial profits from this scheme because the charge was generally double the average rent paid in most house courts. An additional advantage was having workers close at hand—a situation that facilitated better control. In emergencies or when needed elsewhere in southern California, laborers could be summoned immediately and shipped out at a moment's notice. Disruptive employees, of course, were doubly punished by being fired and turned out onto the streets. A 1914 Housing Commission report indicated that at least 29 percent of the employed men in central Los Angeles were railroad employees.³⁹

No matter how humble the structure, a separate, detached shack provided laboring families with coveted freedom and privacy. Belvedere was a desirable area for immigrants, for example, because it was a community that had been planned for single family residences. However, because it lay beyond the city limits, developers managed to ignore city ordinances concerning sanitation and overcrowding. Often, two or three shacks were constructed on one tiny lot, leaving little unoccupied ground space. A 1928 survey of eight city blocks in the district reported 317 houses containing a population of 1,509 persons—an average of 40 houses per block and 4.8 persons per house. Light and ventilation normally remained poor and plumbing facilities substandard. In addition, unpleasant odors and pollution became standard fare in this Mexican "suburb," as gas works, soap factories, and meat packing plants briskly established themselves around Belvedere.⁴⁰

In spite of the shortcomings, the goal for most immigrants was home ownership rather than renting. Owning gave residents a sense of security and a sense of belonging. But industrial development in the central Plaza area in the 1920s pushed prices too high to allow Mexicans to purchase homes. Other areas, like Lincoln and Boyle Heights, also offered property for sale, but that too was expensive. In these communities, homes usually were owned by Italians or Jews. In Belvedere, where over 60 percent of the shacks or bungalows were occupant-owned in 1928, Mexicans could at least afford to buy property "on time." Often payments were as low as \$10 a month, half as expensive as renting in the

Plaza area. The sense of pride in one's own plot of land prompted many to keep spotless houses and yards, despite congested circumstances. Home ownership was a valued ideal among Mexicans in Los Angeles, who shared this aspiration with other working-class immigrant groups across the nation.⁴¹

A few families were able to improve their situation to the extent that they could afford more than two or three rooms. A description of one such home in the late 1920s provides us with an image of what a working class family could aspire to:

The D. home is unpretentious. They have four rooms. The furnishings are better than in most Mexican peon homes. The front room is furnished as I said with a piano, several very comfortable, though inexpensive chairs, one of which is a rocker, and a bright colored rug covers the floor. It is cheap and gaudy but it is a rug. Neat, clean curtains hang at the windows. There are beds and dressers in both bedrooms, small rugs on both floors. The kitchen has its oil stove, table, and cupboard. Everything is immaculately clean, even the yard is swept until it is smooth and hard. Flowerbeds of many colorful varieties are planted between the house and the nearest neighbor's place.⁴²

Unfortunately, irregular employment and extremely low wages forced most Mexican immigrants to live in conditions much worse than the D. home. A 1912 survey found 80 percent of 700 Mexican families surveyed living in habitations of one or two rooms. Endemic unemployment in the early twenties and during the Great Depression could easily wipe out the investment of more prosperous laborers who had purchased homes "on time," while forcing others into less expensive, more crowded housing. Without adequate resources or knowledge, some fell victim to unscrupulous landlords. In 1925, for example, a minister found five families being exploited a few blocks northeast of the Plaza. Two shacks on a small lot at 213 Augusta Street were found to be housing these families, including ten children, in severely overcrowded and unventilated conditions. These families paid a total of \$100 a month for these accommodations, and an additional water bill of as much as \$5 a month. Moreover, the owner of the property also owned a grocery store across the street from which each family was forced to purchase all their groceries and supplies at high prices.⁴³

To add even greater uncertainty to an already precarious situation, periodic attempts at urban renewal forced others out of existing residences, often only to condemn them to less desirable housing situations. As early as 1912, one group of Mexican homeowners at East Seventh and Utah were evicted, probably to make way for railroad development. Between 1906 and 1912, the Housing Commission had 400 units demolished and fifty others vacated. Rarely was there any attempt to find alternative housing for displaced tenants.⁴⁴

The driving force behind most of this residential displacement was the planned growth of business establishments in the downtown region.

Los Angeles' urban planners gave priority to large economic interests and led government officials away from improving living conditions or investing in urban parks or recreation centers. Conditions were often allowed to deteriorate in anticipation of turning a particular area into an industrial district, promising owners higher profits. As one respected sociologist observed, "they are allowed to continue in their illness-producing and death-dealing roles, because love of money by some 'Americans' is greater than the love of the Mexican's health and life."⁴⁵

Substandard housing and overcrowded conditions, of course, bred disease and general poor health. Of particular concern was the prevalence of tuberculosis among the immigrant population. Although Mexicans comprised no more than 10 percent of the city's population, they constituted over one-fourth of the tuberculosis patients and contributed one-fourth of tuberculosis deaths in the city. In the late 1920s, for example, Mexicans accounted for over 20 percent of the patients at Olive View Sanitarium, a county institution for the tubercular. In a 1918 report about health conditions among residents in the North Main district, Dr. Gladys Patric discovered that 105 of the 331 houses studied had been infected with tuberculosis, and a majority had experienced at least one death. Another study of those afflicted by tuberculosis in Los Angeles in 1926 found that seven-eighths of the heads-of-households in Mexican families having tuberculosis were born in Mexico. Four-fifths of these, however, had been in the United States for over five years, strongly indicating to the researchers that living conditions in this country had encouraged the development of the disease. Although Mexican immigrants had suffered the ravages of war and poverty in their homeland, Los Angeles could present comparable dangers to their well-being.⁴⁶

Particularly hard hit were Mexican babies. The Mexican infant mortality rate in 1917 was 152 per 1000 live births, three times higher than for Anglos. In Belvedere and the remaining unincorporated section of Los Angeles, the infant mortality rate for Mexicans was almost twice as high as in the city proper. Much progress was made in bringing down infant mortality in the 1920s, but the rate for Mexicans remained two to three times that of the general population in spite of these efforts.⁴⁷

Reformers were well aware of the ravages of disease in the Mexican population. Sickness, including acute illness, tuberculosis, and physical disability, accounted for 67 percent of the Mexican relief cases at the County Charities, and Mexicans comprised almost one-quarter of all applicants. Moreover, the death or incapacitation of a breadwinner caused many needy families to apply for relief. According to reformers, disease, even when it did not lead to death, could still destroy the future opportunities of poor residents. As a Protestant pamphlet put it, "Every time a baby dies the nation loses a prospective citizen, but in every slum child who lives the nation has a probable consumptive and a possible criminal."⁴⁸

Yet the task of awakening officials to the problems of Mexican newcomers proved very difficult given the intoxicating optimism civic leaders had toward the growth of "the last purely American city in the nation."⁴⁹ In a September 1924 Los Angeles *Times* article entitled "Where Folks Are Folks," essayist Timothy Turner went to great lengths to explain to his readers that Los Angeles was the only place left in the country truly made up of goodhearted "folks." In a city described as "more Anglo-Saxon than the mother country today," the alarming housing and health conditions affecting Mexicans and other ethnic working class groups were often trivialized by boosters caught up in promoting economic growth and Anglo American migration. As Turner described it: "Here our chief foreign element is Mexican, but it even is American in the broad sense: it belongs to the soil. It furnishes common labor with a minimum of social complexities, for the Mexican labor ebbs and flows over the border as it is needed here."⁵⁰ Having been reduced to a slice of nature, the "social complexities" of Mexican immigration and settlement could be ignored.

At times, however, shutting out the harsher realities could prove impossible. Later in the fall of 1924, a dramatic occurrence revealed just how far Los Angeles had to go in providing adequate living conditions for all its residents and acknowledging the social realities in immigrant neighborhoods. An outbreak of bubonic and pneumonic plague forced city authorities to quarantine the entire Plaza/downtown area. Probably carried into California by Asian immigrants, the plague spread rapidly in the congested district. Thirty-four out of the 39 cases diagnosed were fatal. On October 31, local health authorities placed the Macy Street Mexican quarter under quarantine, and in November, the City Council passed an emergency ordinance expanding the restricted area from the junction of the Los Angeles River and North Broadway to Eighth Street at Olive. The city launched a massive program to eradicate the substantial rat population, which carried the disease to humans through infected fleas.⁵¹

Reformers used the outbreak of the plague to press for greater attention to conditions in the city's "foreign district." But once the immediate crisis passed, the Anglo American majority lost interest. After all, how could a community that boasted of being a "City without Slums" realistically come to grips with its endemic social problems? As one astute observer noted, "If our Chamber of Commerce would spend less money telling Eastern people we have no slums, and more money removing our slums, the City as a whole would be far better off."⁵² Most Los Angeles residents, however, rarely considered Mexicans or other foreign-born part of that "whole." The sporadic attention the city's immigrant districts did get was usually inadequate to the complexity of the task. The spirit of growth and boosterism that pervaded Los Angeles in this period served only to mask the blighted lives of those individuals who had left their homes and traveled long distances to toil in the City of the Angels.

to value
Mexico
conditions

PART TWO

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government.

—Ellwood P. Cubberley, Stanford University, on immigrant education, 1909¹

You learn everything that the gringos teach you, but don't believe half of it.

—Advice from a Mexican grandfather to his grandson attending school in the United States²

We have seen frequently that natives or mestizos in rural districts in Mexico have not much notion of their nationality or their country. They know their town and the region in which it is situated, and this is a "little country" for them. People of this type, as immigrants in the United States, learn immediately what their mother country means, and they think of it and speak with love of it. Indeed, it can be said that there is hardly an immigrant home where the Mexican flag is not found in a place of honor, as well as pictures of national Mexican heroes. Love of country sometimes goes so far that little altars are made for flag or hero, or both, giving patriotism thus a religious quality.

—Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, 1928³

Mexican education in the United States . . . seeks to reserve for the *patria* those thousands and thousands of children who either came here at an early age or were born here, the ultimate goal of which is to one day, when the conditions of our country improve, reincorporate them as factors in real progress; for, they will carry with them the advantage of having two languages and the experience of two social mediums which have marked differences which, once compared and culling from them, could produce a level of superior life.

—Editorial in *La Opinión*, June 21, 1930⁴

Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant

Any Mexican who ventured into Los Angeles in the first three decades of the twentieth century must have been immediately struck by the sights and sounds of this burgeoning metropolis. Buildings several stories high dominated the downtown skyline, while trolleys and automobiles made it difficult to cross the streets safely. Despite the Spanish origins of La Reyna de Los Angeles, English prevailed in the language of daily commerce, while more foreign dialects like Chinese and Yiddish mingled equally with the mother tongue of Mexico to form a cacophonous ethnic symphony on the streets of the city. Despite familiar-sounding place-names, a congenial climate, and an occasional structure which looked like home, Los Angeles was indeed a strange environment for a person who had only recently shook the dust of rural Mexico from his or her shoes.

Few Mexican immigrants could have understood that Los Angeles was as alien for the majority of Anglo American residents as it was for them. In 1890 and 1900, no more than one-third of the native-born white population had begun life in California, and this figure decreased to one-fourth in the censuses of 1910, 1920, and 1930. Compared with cities in the East, where over 80 percent of the citizenry were native to their respective states, Los Angeles' Anglo population consisted primarily of people new to the region. Even when viewed in relation to other western cities, Angelinos were exceptionally mobile. San Francisco's American-born population averaged around 65 percent native Californian through these decades, while 30 to 40 percent of the American residents of Denver, Portland, and Seattle had been born in their respective states. "In a population of a million and a quarter," as one visitor described Los Angeles in 1930, "every other person you see has been there less than five years. . . . nine in every ten you see have been there less than fifteen years."¹

Yet even Anglo Americans new to the region took it as their mission to integrate foreigners into southern California. Their own mobility

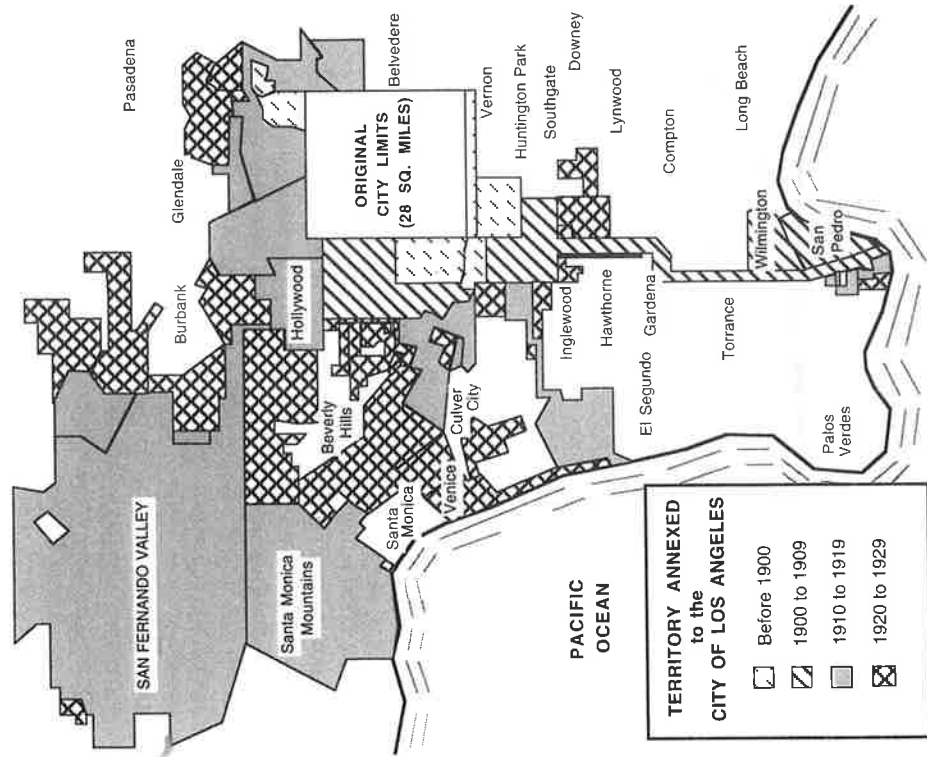
most
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prompted a concern to define better the new culture in which they found themselves. By stressing conformity to the American industrial order, they could try to impose stability on a society in rapid flux. They supported and sometimes developed Americanization programs established by progressive reformers to transform the values of the Mexican immigrant. Ironically because of the peculiar burgeoning character of migration into Los Angeles, these efforts often amounted to one newcomer trying to change another while neither was particularly familiar with local conditions or customs. More than simply an examination of cultures in conflict, Americanization programs revealed the assumptions made about Mexican culture, and also the version of American culture which Anglo American migrants to California brought with them from points east. The context of Euro-American migration to the area set the stage for this conflict.

No other city in the United States attracted so many people so consistently for so long as Los Angeles. Between 1890 and 1930 the city's population increased from 50,000 to 1.2 million, while the number of county residents jumped from 101,000 to 2.2 million. In this period, Los Angeles had grown from a modest-size regional city to become the nation's fifth largest city and fourth largest metropolitan area. Every part of the nation contributed to the tremendous volume of migration to the region. Out of every 100 American-born inhabitants of Los Angeles in 1930, only 28 originated in the Far West, while 37 were midwesterners, 13 southerners, 13 easterners, and 8 westerners.²

Not only did Los Angeles' population boom; the city also grew in physical area from 29 square miles in 1895 to 442 in 1930, making it geographically the largest city in the United States. Los Angeles consistently annexed neighboring communities (see Map 7) in a concerted attempt to supply the necessary water, power, and other utilities for its unchecked suburban sprawl. Moreover, urban growth generated industrial expansion. Initially sustained by the development of manufacturing for local consumption, this growth was bolstered after 1915 by the introduction of the motion picture and oil industries to southern California. By stressing the availability of workers, land, and markets and the weakness of trade unions, the local Chamber of Commerce also successfully wooed national corporations such as the Ford Motor Company and Goodyear Rubber Company to the city. By 1929, Los Angeles surpassed all other western cities in manufacturing, with a total output value of over \$1.3 billion.³

Anglo migrants had generally left behind relatively stable communities to settle in this city rapidly undergoing bewildering change. Most of the city's newcomers came from America's heartland—former residents of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Many of these midwesterners, fresh from mid-American farms and rural towns, had been lured to the West Coast by the energetic



Map 7 Territorial Expansion of the City of Los Angeles

Source: Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 224-25.

publicity efforts of the Chamber of Commerce and the All Year Club of Southern California. Some had caught their first imaginary glimpses of California while strolling down a grocery store aisle in their hometowns, where they encountered vibrantly colored orange crate labels which depicted an idyllic, sun-drenched California lifestyle. These were a product of the Chamber of Commerce's conscious advertising strategy. In 1907, for example, the Southern Pacific Railroad promoted both oranges and migration to California by financing a special Orange Train to Iowa pub-

licizing "Oranges for Health—California for Wealth." That same year the Southern California Fruit Exchange adopted the trademark "Sunkist," a step which marshalled efforts to increase Americans' taste for oranges.⁴

Some migrants first considered moving west after a vacation to southern California. Others came in search of the year-round sunshine and moderate weather which purportedly promoted robust health. The completion of a transcontinental railroad connection by the mid-1880s drew native-born Americans west to Los Angeles. Tourism in the region grew steadily, especially when a rate war between the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe reduced fares by at least two-thirds in the late nineteenth century. Visits to California often convinced tourists and health-seekers to make a permanent move. When agricultural prices rose across the nation after 1896, particularly in the boom years of 1904-06 and 1910-13, many midwestern farmers and storekeepers marketed their last crops and merchandise, sold their farms and shops, and headed west to start a new life. "We are all 'on the jump' nowadays trying to get in this big corn crop," wrote one Nebraska woman, "so that we can hit the trail for California." Others recalled that enthusiasm in some midwestern towns for a move west "spread through the quiet old street, lined with maple trees, like a panic."⁵

Newcomers to the area overwhelmed native Angelinos, creating a population with several exceptional characteristics. Besides its small proportion of California-born, Los Angeles registered a very low ratio of men to women, an extremely circumscribed percentage of young people, and an exceedingly high number of elderly. None of these characteristics was typical of other western settlements, yet they made sense given the dominant nature of the city's family migration from the Midwest and East. Additionally, Los Angeles settlers tended to be either middle class or well-to-do, a feature characteristic of a successful migrant group looking to replace the drudgery of farm labor with greater comforts and more rewarding livelihoods in the land of the sun. Consequently, the white American-born inhabitants of the region were a relatively homogeneous population.

Yet Los Angeles was not without its diversity. Nonwhites (Mexicans included) composed at least 14 percent of the population in 1930, a proportion exceeded only by Baltimore among the nation's largest cities. European immigrants, dominant in the non-native makeup of eastern and midwestern cities, were joined in Los Angeles by large numbers of Mexicans, Japanese, and black newcomers. The Mexican population of the city, which had numbered around 30,000 in 1920, rose dramatically in the decade to at least 97,000 by 1930. African Americans also migrated to Los Angeles in significant numbers, growing in population from around 15,500 in 1920 to 39,000 in 1930. The Japanese community also expanded from about 11,600 in 1920 to over 21,000 in 1930. The Chinese population of Los Angeles remained relatively small in this period, numbering between 2,000 and 3,000. Diversity in Los Angeles,

as compared to that which marked eastern cities, represented a wider range of cultures and peoples.⁶

It was the middle-class midwesterner, however, who dominated the public culture and politics of the city during the early twentieth century. These were the settlers who had been lured by the railroads and the Chamber of Commerce to populate the Los Angeles basin. Real estate agents began carving out former farm and ranch land into suburban plots for single-family residences, complete with front and back lawns. As the newcomers settled into their new homes, they transformed Los Angeles into a sprawling metropolitan area. More important, they reshaped the political and social mindset of southern California, giving it a midwestern flavor.

Midwestern migrants to California brought with them a familiar Protestant world view. This pietistic perspective emphasized faith in a transcendent God, concentrated on the immediacy of personal conversion, and adhered to strict codes of proper behavior to insure individual salvation and prosperity. Adherents strongly supported temperance and opposed parochial schools, and they had little compunction about using politics to advocate their beliefs. Nativism led some to see immigrants as embodiments of evil, repudiating both their Catholicism as well as their occasional pleasure in drink. In describing the social makeup of midwestern small towns, observer Lewis Atherton clearly drew the social spheres which affected the midwestern world view:

Here, then, was the cultural pattern—a dominant middle-class Protestant group given to religion and stern morality; an upper-class group of "respectable" people who failed to see any necessary connection between pleasure and sin; Catholics; foreigners; and a "lower" class, which ignored the dominant code except perhaps for temporary allegiance following revival meetings.⁷

The dominant middle-class pietists frequently exhibited distinctly anti-urban sympathies, since the city often appeared a corrupting, sinful environment, full of immigrants and liquor. The impersonality of the urban milieu denied pietists the moral leverage that they had exercised in their smaller rural hometowns. No wonder many bolted the Republican party in 1896 to vote for William Jennings Bryan, who canonized the farmer in his famous "Cross of Gold" speech by declaring: "Burn down your cities and leave our farms and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."⁸

But in the 1890s and particularly after the turn of the century, the midwestern suspicion of the city became intermingled with a powerful attraction. Gradually, distrust was overcome by the lure of the metropolis, and it became increasingly difficult to keep the subsequent generation "down on the farm." Upward of 90 percent of California's incoming Americans settled in urban areas, making the state's population the most

highly urbanized in the union by 1920.⁹ But California's midwestern migrants had opted for a particular kind of environment. They were a special lot, with the resources to make a 1500 mile journey in search of a new home. They had consciously rejected cities like Chicago or New York, areas teeming with impoverished European immigrants and crowded ghettos. Instead, they sought a land that promoters described as "a warm, dry climate, a varied, even exotic landscape, and a familiar suburban environment . . . an easier, more varied, less complicated, and well-rounded life."¹⁰ Indeed, some argued Los Angeles retained a midwestern flavor. As one promoter observed, contrasting the City of Angels with other regions:

Witness the difference in the attitude of crowds here and in the East. Those that came from the Atlantic seaboard, the northern half of it, will recall that ill nature of crowds, that sharpness of those that handle crowds. It starts at Ellis Island and gets less and less as you come west. It is the influence directly and indirectly, of a deluge of South and Central Europe peasantry. Who could call those crowds "folks?"¹¹

Though rejecting the traditional style of rural life, Los Angeles migrants also brought with them this distinctly anti-urban ethos. They dreamed of a pastoral suburbia, with homes resting picturesquely among valleys and hills. "Ruralize the city; urbanize the country," urged the Reverend Dana W. Bartlett, head of the city's housing commission in 1910. Born in Maine, reared in Iowa, and destined to lead early Americanization efforts in Los Angeles, this minister exemplified the midwestern commitment to social harmony based on the scattering of the populace.¹² He favored a sparse dispersal of residences and encouraged the endless physical expansion of the city to avoid overcrowding and congestion. Ironically, this pattern of urban sprawl would eventually make Los Angeles one of the largest cities in the nation. With over 100,000 people a year moving to southern California during the 1920s, the dream of quiet, peaceful suburban life was doomed.¹³

Midwestern migrants brought with them a desire to recreate a sense of community in their new neighborhoods, hoping to perpetuate the communal familiarity which characterized their former rural and small town lives. Though homeowner associations were organized to maintain racial and class exclusivity, suburbs brought assorted individuals together only superficially. Feelings of isolation and loneliness quickly set in. "I felt so odd among so many and so many miles between me and my home folks," confided a young bride to her diary in 1906. Ironically, the churches lost membership, while secular state societies flourished. Iowans were the first to hold Sunday picnic meetings, and by the late 1920s, 500,000 transplanted midwesterners were members of some state society.¹⁴

In the city, the newcomers feared lowering standards of personal morality even as they sought a climate and natural environment which

promoted relaxation and fun. Historian Elaine Tyler May has characterized these paradoxical impulses in Los Angeles as representative of a "Victorian tradition in transition":

Clearly, these Midwesterners wanted something new, fresh, and exciting. But they also wanted a place where they could live, work, and establish families in tune with the values of the past. . . . Combining reverence for the old with eagerness for the new, they helped set the tone for America's first truly twentieth-century city. Desires for newness, however, were contained within a strong adherence to tradition; the mold in which these settlers cast their new city was distinctly Victorian.¹⁵

This paradox was exemplified by various public efforts to enforce morality in the twentieth century. For example, in 1917, Los Angeles voters approved a local ordinance eliminating saloons and restricting alcoholic beverages to beer and wine. The city gained a reputation for being the "driest" in the state. But this pietist dream eventually turned into an administrative nightmare. By the mid-1920s, police had their hands full trying to enforce prohibition on an uncooperative public.¹⁶

Transplanted midwesterners underwent an acute "search for order" in California, an extreme version of the nationwide process described by Robert H. Wiebe.¹⁷ In the new, confusing environment, they sought to reconcile their small town values with the larger, impersonal bureaucracy of urbanized Los Angeles. As the dream of a suburban paradise faltered, many turned to politics for a solution. In 1909, George Alexander, a former Iowa farmer and merchant, was elected mayor of the city on a progressive reform platform. The following year, the gubernatorial campaign of reformer Hiram Johnson attracted the attention of countless disgruntled newcomers to the West Coast.

Johnson directed his appeal to "the people," pitting himself against the directors of the Southern Pacific Railroad and their oligopolistic control over politicians in the state. His strident message appealed to midwestern moral sensibilities and to the growing national inclination to oppose large corporate power. Johnson also provided them with an easy scapegoat for the disappointments they had experienced in their new home. In addition, Angelinos had concrete reasons to support an attack on the railway companies. Henry Huntington, nephew of Southern Pacific Railroad president Collis P. Huntington, controlled southern California's electric streetcars, making millions from speculative real estate investment in the process. Most city residents blamed him for inefficient transit, congested downtown streets, and costly public services. As a partial consequence, Johnson received the majority of the Republican primary vote in Los Angeles County, carried every southern county in the general election, and attracted widespread support from voters of native stock.¹⁸

It was this progressive coalition that enabled the Johnson administration to enact its most significant legislative reforms. In 1913, still riding

the wave of his electoral victories, Johnson established a permanent Commission of Immigration and Housing, creating the primary body governing the state's immigrant policy for the next decade. The CIH investigated the working and living conditions of immigrants to California and spearheaded efforts to teach English to and Americanize foreigners. Although governmental bodies and private organizations in other states also sought to Americanize Mexicans and other immigrants, California's program was the most successful attempt to combine the efforts of government, business, and private citizens in dealing with the "problem of the immigrant." In a "scientific" and "rational" fashion, the Commission impressively recruited university academics, religious social workers, government bureaucrats, and white middle-class volunteers.¹⁹

The original impetus for the creation of the CIH came from social reformers in the Progressive-party dedicated to the social settlement movement and the "Social Gospel" tradition. At the 1912 Progressive party convention, social workers Jane Addams and Frances Kellor introduced a statement subsequently incorporated into the party platform. The plank squarely committed Progressives to "Governmental action to encourage the distribution of immigrants away from the congested cities, to rigidly supervise all private agencies dealing with them and to promote their assimilation, education and advancement." In Chicago, Hiram Johnson, selected to be Theodore Roosevelt's running mate, was first approached about the CIH by California delegate Simon Lubin, himself a product of social settlement work in Boston's South End and Manhattan's Lower East Side. Lubin, who would eventually head the commission, envisioned an agency which would promote mutual accommodation between the native-born and foreign-born, with a focus on "immigrant gifts"—the cultural strengths that foreigners brought with them to American society.²⁰

However, Lubin's initial emphasis on preserving what was positive and vital in various immigrant cultures gradually met with resistance. As World War I heightened anxieties concerning immigrants, nativist sentiment began to affect Americanization efforts through the "100 Per Cent American" movement, a loose collection of interests which sought to insure the loyalty of the immigrant to the United States. Additionally, big business took an interest in Americanization, as leaders sought a method to combat radicalism among foreign-born workers. Employers supported efforts to produce loyal, obedient employees, with at least one ultra-conservative business group in Los Angeles encouraging a "super-patriotism" that included upholding the "open shop."²¹

Moreover, as the decade progressed, Johnson's social agenda lost support among middle-class Angelinos, especially when he took positions in favor of workmen's compensation, minimum wage laws, and restrictions on child labor.²² Los Angeles County's fickle enthusiasm for Johnson's programs also indicated a more conservative approach to the problems of immigration than that of Lubin and his supporters. While ethnic

organizations of Jews and Italians played a prominent role in Americanization efforts to the north, groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution led efforts in southern California from the start. By 1923, the conservative approach had prevailed statewide, as governor Friend W. Richardson dismantled the Commission on Immigration and Housing and transferred its Americanization duties to the state's Department of Education. Immigrant traditions and customs were now seen as impediments to their rapid, thorough integration into American life.²³ Ellwood P. Cubberley of Stanford University, long an advocate of the application of business methods in the schools, took over as the leading spokesperson for the Americanization work in the state. His philosophy of immigrant education was unequivocal. "Our task," he observed as early as 1909,

is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government.²⁴

Americanization programs dealing with the Mexican immigrant, largely developed after World War I, were swept up in this change of direction. The originators of California's program envisioned that the opening of the Panama Canal would bring an influx of European immigrants to California's shores; they did not anticipate the curtailment brought about by World War I and the subsequent immigration restriction acts. California progressives also reflected the general distaste for Asian immigration as reflected in their support for the 1913 Alien Land Act aimed at restricting Japanese land ownership or more long-standing calls for Asian exclusion. More apt to see Japanese and Chinese immigrants as "unassimilable," these reformers considered the Mexican immigrant as similar to the European in adaptability. Mexicans might have presented a greater challenge than did Italians or Jews, but California's Americanizers found nothing inherent in the Mexican character to prevent their eventual assimilation into the "American way of life."²⁵

This position was clearly at odds with the approach of several groups who also witnessed increasing Mexican immigration in these years. Nativists, including many Anglo American politicians, academics, reporters, and others who believed in Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, waged a long and virulent campaign against unrestricted Mexican immigration. After successfully pushing Congress to limit severely immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe in 1920, nativists were dismayed to discover that the law still allowed for the widespread introduction of "foreigners" from south of the border, whom they considered equally, if not more, undesirable. Emphasizing the "Indian" or "Negro" makeup of the Mexican, his or her threat to "American standards of living," and the view that the Mexican represented an unstable element in a democracy, these nativists called for restriction on racial grounds.²⁶ Kenneth L. Rob-

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erts, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1928, gave voice to nativist sentiment when he observed that in Los Angeles, one sees:

the endless streets crowded with the shacks of illiterate, diseased, pauperized Mexicans, taking no interest whatever in the community, living constantly on the ragged edge of starvation, bringing countless numbers of American citizens into the world with the reckless proclivity of rabbits²⁷

Nativists were joined by others in their attempt to have Mexican immigration contained or reversed. Organized labor, under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor, viewed Mexican immigrants as cheap competitors with "American" workers. Samuel Gompers urged Congress to include Mexico in quota restrictions, arguing that Mexicans would not be content with farm labor and would soon attempt to enter the trades in the cities. Only months before his death in 1924, Gompers expressed concern that in Los Angeles, "it appeared . . . that every other person met on the streets was a Mexican."²⁸

In contrast to these restrictionists, southwestern employers, particularly railroad, agricultural, and mining companies, defended unrestricted Mexican immigration on economic grounds. They were no less racist in their attitudes, but cited the economic advantage of Mexican labor, contending that "white" laborers would not and should not perform certain work. According to these employers, Mexican labor provided the most desirable option for filling labor shortages and was vital for the survival of their industries. To counteract the racial and political arguments of restrictionists, employers stressed that the cultural traits rejected by nativists actually benefited American society. The Mexican worker, they argued, embodied the perfect, docile employee, had no interest in intermixing with Americans, and invariably returned to Mexico once his labor was no longer needed. W. H. Knox of the Arizona Cotton Growers' Association belittled nativists' fears by asking,

Have you ever heard, in the history of the United States, or in the history of the human race, of the white race being overrun by a class of people of the mentality of the Mexicans? I never have. We took this country from Mexico. Mexico did not take it from us. To assume that there is any danger of any likelihood of the Mexican coming in here and colonizing this country and taking it away from us, to my mind, is absurd.²⁹

Whatever their theoretical position on the Mexican immigration issue, however, Anglo residents of Los Angeles had to face the fact that Mexican immigrants were becoming a permanent fixture in the urban environment. From 1910 to 1920, Mexicans had become the leading foreign-born group in the state, forming 12 percent of California's immigrant population. By 1930, that figure increased to almost 19 percent.³⁰

While the battle between restrictionists and employers raged in legislatures and in the editorial pages of newspapers, other analysts began to believe that Americanization of these migrants was the only means to

becoming permanent fixture

insure their cultural allegiance to the United States. Eventually, Mexicans became the primary targets of Americanization programs in California during the decade preceding the Great Depression. Particularly in the southern half of the state, Americanization came to embody the Anglo majority's attitudes toward Mexican immigrants. Borrowing from the arguments of both restrictionists and employers, Mexican culture in the United States was carefully scrutinized in the 1920s and found wanting.³¹

With the appointment of Dr. Emory S. Bogardus at the University of Southern California in 1911, Los Angeles had an academic who would, through his writings and that of his students and colleagues, lead the efforts to provide intellectual justification for Americanization over the next few decades in Los Angeles. Trained in sociology under Robert Park at the University of Chicago, Bogardus saw his mission in Los Angeles to be much like the more famous studies of social conditions of Chicago's ethnic working classes during the 1920s. Bogardus was appointed the first chairman of the Department of Sociology at USC, then organized USC's School of Social Work in the early 1920s, where he served as its first dean. Well into the 1930s, he regularly wrote on the conditions of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, and encouraged his many students to take ethnic Los Angeles as a site for many of their studies.³²

Several of his graduate students rose in prominence as the leading social reformers and activists in the city during the 1920s and 1930s. They included a future director of the Los Angeles Housing Commission, future principals and teachers in the Los Angeles School District, and many social settlement workers in the immediate area. In fact, what distinguished the efforts made by USC's Department of Sociology and School of Social Work from the more famous work of Robert Park at the University of Chicago was its heavily moralistic impetus which had no qualms about mixing Protestant sensibilities, academic research, and public policy. Intimately linked to the growing Protestant social activism of the 1920s, Bogardus and these former students saw their role as awakening the growing Anglo American population of Los Angeles to the social realities and dangers represented by poorer, ethnic newcomers to the region.

Initially, most programs focused on identifying immigrants through their employers, a practice which inevitably made men the targets of Americanization. In the summer of 1917, for example, a railroad company found that converting one of its boxcars into a model house made good business sense. This rolling example of middle-class American culture also served as transportation for the Americanization teachers. "The labor supply had been more steady," reported the Commission of Immigration and Housing, and "the camp had been kept in beautiful condition, and the satisfaction of the workmen was showing itself in the better care of the track."³³

dangers presented by poor

Soon, however, Americanization instructors discovered that there were many factors which seriously undercut their efforts with male laborers. First, the transient nature of migratory, seasonal labor made sustained language instruction unfeasible:

Many start [English language night classes] and show rapid progress, and then their work takes them away to another part of the county. When they return they have forgotten much they had learned because they have had little opportunity to practice English. Their class is ahead of them, and they "have shame," and do not want to re-enter, unless there are others in the same situation.³⁴

Additionally, many teachers complained that the employers had created a situation in which the average Mexican laborer could not find sufficient opportunity to use the English language. Most stores he frequented had Spanish-speaking clerks to assist him. A few simple English words were all that was needed to negotiate the streetcar system to get to work. Most important, he was employed primarily in a segregated "gang" situation with other Mexican laborers, where the foreman usually spoke Spanish.³⁵

These problems, along with the difficulty of securing the aid of enough employers, led Americanization advocates to search for an alternative approach. Since single men seemed more apt to drift from work site to work site and then to return to Mexico, it gradually became apparent that influencing the home life of married men, particularly those with children, might yield the desired results. Beginning with the World War I period, several important employers began to give preference to men with families. In addition, changes in immigration law made it more likely for men to keep their families with them in the city. The professionalization of Americanization work after 1920 also moved the locus of efforts into the schools and community centers, and away from migratory camps and employment sites, where volunteers had previously focused their attention. This shift determined that future Americanization work would center on immigrant women and their children, expressing Americanizers' hope that the influence of the home would extend to the public sphere. Justification for this modification of earlier plans was quick in coming:

The Americanization of the women is as important a part as that of the men. They are harder to reach but are more easily educated. They can realize in a moment that they are getting the best end of the bargain by the change in relationships between men and women which takes place under the new American order. . . . "Go after the women" should become a slogan among Americanization workers, for after all the greatest good is to be obtained by starting the home off right. The children of these foreigners are the advantages to America, not the naturalized foreigners. These are never 100% Americans, but the second generation may be. "Go after the women" and you may save the second generation for America.³⁶

The mechanism by which Mexican immigrant women were to be reached was already in place in the infrastructure of the Commission's activities. In 1915, the California state legislature passed the Home Teacher Act, a law which allowed school districts to employ teachers "to work in the homes of the pupils, instructing children and adults in matters relating to school attendance . . . in sanitation, in the English language, in household duties . . . and in the fundamental principles of the American system of government and the rights and duties of citizenship."³⁷ After World War I, the home teacher program was expanded, professionalized, and located within the public school system. From 1915 to 1929, the home teacher—usually a single, middle-class, Anglo woman—was the linchpin of Americanization efforts aimed at the Mexican family.

—Mexican immigrant women were targeted for a variety of reasons. First, they were assumed to be the individuals primarily responsible for the transmission of values in the home. According to reformer's strategy, if the female adopted American values, the rest of her family would follow suit. Pearl Ellis, who worked with young Mexican women in southern California throughout the 1920s, stressed the important "influence of the home" in creating an employee who is "more dependable and less revolutionary in his tendencies The homekeeper creates the atmosphere, whether it be one of harmony and cooperation or of dissatisfaction and revolt."³⁸

Americanization advocates were interested in the contribution Mexican women could make in transforming their families' habits from those of a rural, pre-industrial lifestyle to a modern American one. Herbert Gutman, in his important essay, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America," has examined the "recurrent tension" produced when immigrant men and women new to the American industrial order came into contact with the rigorous discipline of the factory system.³⁹ Because the Southwest lagged behind the rest of the nation in industrialization, local reformers were anxious to introduce Mexican women and men as rapidly as possible to the temperament of industrial society and inculcate Mexican families with the "Protestant work ethic." Targeting mothers was crucial to the overall strategy of Americanization.

Motherhood, in fact, was the Mexican immigrant woman's most highly valued role in Americanization schemes. By focusing on the strategic position of the mother in the Mexican family, Americanizers hoped to have an impact on the second generation, even if the immigrant generation itself turned out to be less malleable than expected. Undeniably, Americanization ideology was infused with the traditional American belief in the exalted role of the mother in shaping the citizenry of the Republic.⁴⁰ "As the mother furnishes the stream of life to the babe at her breast," wrote Ellis in a guide for teachers,

so will she shower dewdrops of knowledge on the plastic mind of her young child. Her ideals and aspirations will be breathed into its spirit, molding its

NO MORE TEACHERS
program

target

character for all time. The child, in turn, will pass these rarer characteristics on to its descendants, thus developing the intellectual, physical, and spiritual qualities of the individual, which in mass, are contributions to civilization.⁴¹

Although Americans had debated for almost three decades the conflicts between women's private family responsibilities and their public roles as workers, Americanization programs demonstrated no such concern when addressing the ideal future of the Mexican American woman. With regard to immigrant women, Americanization advocates were readily capable of blurring the public and private spheres.⁴² Teaching the Mexican mother proper American homemaking skills was meant to solve two problems at once: a happy and efficient mother would create an environment suitable for molding workers to the industrial order, and her newfound homemaking skills could be utilized in the cheap labor market outside the home. In 1908, a U.S. Bureau of Labor inspector had regretfully noted that Mexican "immigrant women have so little conception of domestic arrangements in the United States that the task of training them would be too heavy for American housewives."⁴³ However, black and European immigrant women had not migrated to southern California in large enough numbers to fill the growing demand for domestic labor. Consequently, Americanization teachers targeted Mexican women to help alleviate the shortage of housemaids, seamstresses, laundresses, and service workers in the Southwest.⁴⁴ By the 1920s, Americanization programs were busy training Mexican women to perform these tasks.

The most potent weapon used to imbue the foreigner with American values was the English language. All social reformers cited the ability to speak English as a fundamental skill necessary for assimilation. During and after World War I, however, English instruction was intended to provide the immigrant with much more than facility with the spoken language of the United States. In 1917, California's Commission of Immigration and Housing recommended "that employers of immigrants be shown the relation between a unified working force, speaking a common language, and industrial prosperity."⁴⁵ In 1918, Mrs. Amanda Matthews Chase, a home teacher with twelve years' experience teaching in Mexico City, was hired by the Daughters of the American Revolution and developed a primer to teach English. Home teachers were instructed to associate their lessons "with the pupils' own lives and affairs."⁴⁶ Thus, for example, they used the following song (sung to the tune, "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys are Marching") to instruct female pupils about women's work as they learned twenty-seven new English words:

We are working every day,
So our boys and girls can play.
We are working for our homes and country, too;
We like to wash, to sew, to cook,
We like to write, or read a book,

We are working, working, working every day.
Work, work, work,
We are always working,
Working for our boys and girls,
Working for our boys and girls,
For our homes and country, too—
We are working, working, working every day.⁴⁷

Yet despite the attention of reformers, Mexican women continued to lag behind men in learning the English language. A study of 1,081 Mexican families in Los Angeles conducted in 1921 found that while 55 percent of the men were unable to speak English, an overwhelming 74 percent of the women could not speak the language. Similar gaps existed in English reading and writing.⁴⁸

Advocates of Americanization blamed the patriarchal nature of the Mexican family for this discrepancy. "The married Mexican laborer does not allow his wife, as a rule, to attend evening classes," reported USC's Emory Bogardus.⁴⁹ Americanization teachers consistently criticized as traditional and unprogressive the alleged limitations placed upon the Mexican wife by her husband. According to one Americanization instructor, if left in the home, the Mexican woman's "intellectual ability is stimulated only by her husband and if he be of the average peon type, the stimulation is not very great." The Mexican home, she concluded, "being a sacred institution, is guarded by all the stolid tradition of centuries."⁵⁰ If the Mexican home remained such a fortress, Americanization specialists would not be able to accomplish their mission.

Getting the Mexican woman out of her home, therefore, became a priority for Americanization programs because reformers saw this not only as the only avenue available for her intellectual progress, but as the only method by which they could succeed in altering her values. Home teachers visited each individual Mexican family in their district to gain the trust of members and encourage the husband to allow his wife to attend classes. The scheduling of alternative sessions in the afternoon for wives and mothers facilitated this process.⁵¹

Americanization programs, however, did not mean to undermine entirely the traditional Mexican family structure. Ironically, they counted on the cohesiveness of the Mexican family to achieve their assimilationist goals. Home teachers, even when they did get Mexican women out of the house and into classes, encouraged the acquisition of traditionally feminine household skills. In the dirty, "The Day's Work," for example, home teachers utilized the following sequence of phrases both to teach the English language and to instruct women about the proper organization of the family economy in American society.

In the morning the women get breakfast.
Their husbands go to work.
Their children go to school.

Don't want
to undermine
family structure

tradition
unprogressive
attitudes
of
Mexican
men

★

get
out
of
home

Then the women get their houses in good order.
 They give the baby its bath.
 They wash, or iron, or cook.
 They get the dinner.
 After dinner they wash the dishes.
 Then they sew, or rest, or visit their friends, or go to school.⁵²

Americanization programs sought to maintain the structure of family life while transforming familial habits, especially those concerning diet and health. Reformers encouraged Mexican women to give up their penchant for fried foods, their too frequent consumption of rice and beans, and their custom of serving all members of the family—from infants to grandparents—the same meal. According to proponents of Americanization, the modern Mexican woman should replace tortillas with bread, serve lettuce instead of beans, and broil instead of fry. Malnourishment in Mexican families was not blamed on lack of food or resources, but rather on “not having the right varieties of foods containing constituents favorable to growth and development.”⁵³

Women in the American reform movement were certainly conversant with the turn-of-the-century domestic science movement—a movement which associated scientific homemaking with moral regeneration.⁵⁴ Within the rubric of Americanization efforts, food and diet management became yet another tool in a system of social control intended to construct a well-behaved, productive citizenry. In the eyes of reformers, the typical noon lunch of the Mexican child, thought to consist of “a folded tortilla with no filling,” could easily be the first step to a lifetime of crime. With “no milk or fruit to whet the appetite” the child could become lazy as well as hungry and might subsequently “take food from the lunch boxes of more fortunate children. Thus, the initial step in a life of thieving is taken.”⁵⁵ Teaching immigrant women proper food values became a route to keeping the head of the family out of jail and the rest of the family off charity.

Health and cleanliness represented additional catchwords for Americanization programs. One of the primary functions of home teachers was to impress upon the minds of Mexican mothers and mothers-to-be “that a clean body and clean mind are the attributes of a good citizen.” Reformers working with Mexican women were warned, however, that their task would be a difficult one. “Sanitary, hygienic, and dietetic measures are not easily learned by the Mexican. His [sic] philosophy of life flows along the lines of least resistance and it requires far less exertion to remain dirty than to clean up.” Reformers blamed Mexicans’ slovenliness for their poor state of health. Such labeling reinforced the stereotype of the “dirty Mexican” and expanded its usage among Anglo urban dwellers. One eminent sociologist working with Americanization programs noted that Anglo Americans objected to the presence of Mexican children in the public schools for fear that their own children would catch a contagious disease.⁵⁶

Pressing “American” standards of diet, health, and cleanliness upon Mexican women was not the only component essential in creating a healthy home environment. None of the potential gains made by these programs could be considered noteworthy if the Mexican female continued to bear too many children. Americanization advocates worried that unless she learned to limit family size, the Mexican mother would be unable to train adequately each individual member of her household.

Limiting the growth of the immigrant population was a longstanding concern of both Progressives and nativists. Americans first noticed that immigrant groups had a higher birthrate than native-born Americans at the end of the nineteenth century, and fears of “race suicide” had existed in the Anglo American mind ever since. When this fear rose in relation to the Mexican immigrant, both nativists and proponents of Americanization became alarmed: nativists wished to stave off an “invasion,” while Americanization advocates viewed all unrestricted population growth as a vestige of Old World ways that must be abandoned in a modern industrial setting.⁵⁷

Americanizers held Mexican women responsible for family planning. They also saw her hampered in these efforts by a number of factors. Traditional early marriage and the “inherent sentimentality” of the Mexican female promoted, they believed, a primitive sexuality and reinforced sexual ignorance. In addition, Catholicism discouraged birth control. Despite these barriers, Americanization teachers reported that Mexican mothers were beginning to exhibit dismay with their large families, and occasionally inquired about birth control measures. Some even warned others to delay marriage on the grounds of “much work, too much children.”⁵⁸

Americanists viewed such evidence of changing attitudes as a hopeful sign, because limited reproduction opened up new opportunities for Mexican women within and outside the home. As proper household managers, Mexican women could devote more time to raising fewer and more productive children. But family limitation also created new possibilities for female employment by freeing Mexican women from the demands of continual childrearing. Traditionally, Mexican women’s family obligations had barred them from wage labor outside the home. When a Mexican immigrant woman worked, it was almost always in her late adolescent or early adult years before marriage.⁵⁹

As industrialization in the American southwestern economy developed, so too did demands for cheap labor performing tasks that had traditionally been performed by women inside the home. While the garment, laundering, domestic service, and food preparation industries gradually relied more on “women’s work” in the marketplace, employers in the region had fewer workers because of the restrictions placed upon Asian and European immigration, and because black migration to the Southwest was still quite low. Moreover, demands of the Anglo middle class for these services increased, exacerbating further the labor supply

problems. Despite all the traditional objections to Mexican women working outside the home, Americanization programs actively promoted Mexican immigrant women for entrance into these sex-segregated occupations.⁶⁰

This commercialization of traditional female forms of labor made it easier for Americanizers to advocate instruction in such tasks without appearing to upset the social order within the Mexican family. For example, skilled needlework was viewed in Americanization programs as a talent passed down through generations of Mexican women. Americanization teachers fostered such activity so "that we may not lose this valuable contribution to our civilization with the passing of time." Some reformers argued that needlework instruction should replace academic courses for Mexican girls as early as the third grade in school. This sort of activity, supposedly more in line with "traditional abilities," they argued, would keep Mexican girls in school and foster "greater respect for the school and for our civilization."⁶¹

Given the dual role reformers envisioned that the Mexican woman would play within and outside the home, every newly learned skill supposedly benefited American society doubly. When Americanists stressed the ability to set a table and to serve food properly, they were encouraging Mexican women not only to arrange home meals by American standards but also to learn that "sloppy appearance and uncleanness of person would not be tolerated in a waitress." In addition, the burden on a private citizen employing a Mexican woman as a domestic servant would be considerably lightened if the employee had already been adequately trained through their programs. As one social worker stated in the late 1920s: "Americans want household help for two or three days a week, and they can, if they will, take Mexican women and teach them. It requires patience to be sure, but there are large numbers of Mexicans who can fill the household gap if the proper conditions are made."⁶²

Encouraging Mexican women to engage in hard work was also viewed as an important step toward "curing" the habits of the stereotypical "lazy Mexican." According to one Americanization teacher, "*Quien sabe?*" (who knows?) was the philosophy of all of Mexico, and the inability of Mexicans to connect the things that are valued as worthwhile to the effort necessary to obtain them made Mexican laborers inefficient." Another felt that "the laziness of Mexicans was due to climate conditions and inherited tendencies" which only hard work could root out. Consequently, putting Mexican women to work would have the effect of promoting discipline in them, which in turn would encourage them to pass on a similar level of self-control to their children.⁶³

Eventually, as national attention increasingly turned toward restricting future immigration from Mexico, Americanization advocates found themselves caught in the middle of the controversy, with little concrete evidence to prove that their efforts had effectively resolved the "Mexican problem." One of the few quantifiable means by which to mea-

sure success or failure in Americanization was the rate of naturalization, and in this area Mexican immigrants displayed little progress. Statistics from the period simply did not suggest that Americanization had affected the rate of naturalization. In fact, among the Mexican immigrant population in California, which already had the lowest rate of naturalization of any immigrant group in the state in 1920, the ratio of naturalized citizens to the total foreign-born Mexican population declined during the 1920s.⁶⁴ Given this trend, and the long-standing ambivalence of reformers toward the immigrant, Americanizers shifted their focus. In 1927, the Commission of Immigration and Housing sided with restrictionists, calling for an end to unlimited immigration from Mexico, and blaming immigrants for "causing an immense social problem in our charities, schools and health departments."⁶⁵

Moreover, the efforts to alter the immigrant generation itself were abandoned in favor of school-based programs which sought to teach American-born children a culture different from that of their immigrant parents. In the schools, socialization in American values and language skills were even more emphatically combined with the goal of social stability. The increased application of I.Q. testing, always administered in English, invariably segregated Mexican children in special classes for the mentally inferior or mentally retarded. Macy Street School, for example, located just east of the Plaza, developed a curriculum at the primary level in which two-thirds of class time was spent on "decorative subjects" such as music, dancing, art, needlework, cooking, and other manual arts. The pedagogical impetus behind this curriculum was that the "Mexican genius expresses itself through activities rather than abstractions." At the secondary level, citizenship classes were integrated into vocational training for laundries, restaurants, garages, household work, and agriculture. By the late 1920s, the promoters of Americanization put their hopes for the future in vocational education and classes in citizenry directed at American-born Mexican children.⁶⁶

The efforts directed at children, like those aimed earlier at their parents, promoted above all the habits of thrift and time discipline. In southern California, business interests ardently favored Americanization programs that advocated promptness and diligence at work. Businessmen learned to cooperate both with the Protestant reformers interested in fostering internal controls over morality and economy and with the social feminists hoping to upgrade women's position within the Mexican family. They understood full well that despite the range of motivations behind Americanization, the price of acceptance for Mexicans into American society via their programs was predicated on the abandonment of a culture they perceived as inherently inferior.

Rather than provide Mexican immigrants with an attainable picture of assimilation, Americanization programs could offer these immigrants only idealized versions of American values. In reality what was presented turned out to be little more than second-class citizenship. The most pro-

abandon inferior culture

gressive assumptions behind Americanization programs were never fully shared by the government or business interests involved, and thus they could never be fully implemented. One Americanization teacher who spent the decade working with Mexican immigrants noted with disappointment in 1923 that the newly elected governor of California had eliminated financial provisions for the Americanization program in the public schools from his budget.⁶⁷ At least one historian has concluded that the "love affair between the progressive and the businessman" in California inevitably led, in the 1920s, to a blunting of "the cutting edge of progressive social reform."⁶⁸

The halfhearted effort of administrators of Americanization programs limited available personnel and resources and ensured that the programs would never be able to cope with the volume of the Mexican migration. The barrios expanded so quickly in the 1920s that any single Americanization teacher found it impossible to keep abreast of the number of new Mexican families in her district who needed a resumption of her program from scratch. Newer areas of Mexican settlement were usually beyond the reach of established Americanization programs entirely. Furthermore, Mexicans experienced a high degree of geographic mobility in this period that easily wiped out whatever progress had been made by these programs in a given community. According to historian Ricardo Romo, fewer than one-third of Mexicans present in Los Angeles in 1917-18 were present in the city one decade later.⁶⁹ Americanization teacher Amanda Chase acknowledged the extent of this problem when dealing with Mexican women: "I have had in my class record book this year the names of about half as many Mexican women as there are Mexican families in the district. But a third of them moved to other districts."⁷⁰ Mexican immigrants could not hope to develop allegiances to the United States when the economic condition of their families forced them to migrate consistently in search of an economic livelihood.

In the end, Americanization programs never had the time to develop sufficiently even to approach a solution to the problem of Mexican immigrants in the United States. With the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression of the 1930s, all attempts to Americanize Mexican immigrants came to an abrupt end. Rather than search for ways to assimilate these newcomers, American society looked for methods to be rid of them altogether. About 500,000 Mexicans left the United States during the 1930s under strong pressure from the government, and up to one-tenth of these individuals had resided in Los Angeles.⁷¹ Americanists joined in these efforts to repatriate Mexican residents; their commitment to improving the conditions of the Mexican had no place in an economically depressed America.

Instead, Americanization programs are an important window for looking at the assumptions made about both Mexican and American culture by progressive Californians during the 1920s. Mexican culture was seen as malleable, but required intense education in "American values"

to fit into a modern, industrialized society. These efforts also made clear, however, that Mexicans were intended only to assimilate into the bottom segment of the American work force as low-paid, yet loyal, workers. As we shall see, Mexican immigrants generated their own version of Americanism without abandoning Mexican culture. What they would create would be quite a different product indeed.

Can't cope w/ volume
migrate constantly
don't want Mexican
Depression-era America