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| A History of Immigrant Laborers  From The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Post World War II |
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# A History of Immigrant Laborers

## From The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Post World War II

The time period spanning from the latter half of the nineteenth to the former half of the twentieth century was a time of incredibly fast economic development in the United States of America aided by a large and diverse immigrant workforce. With the inventions of electric and steam power, products such as steel, wheat, and cotton were produced at staggering rates, previously thought to be impossible (Zinn, 2). Newly constructed railroads made possible the transportation of said products across great distances, which led to the formation of densely populated metropolises like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The only way for this rapid development to occur was for corporations to employ a large source of cheap labor. Mexican and Mexican-American labor accounted for a majority of agricultural labor spanning from the West to the Midwest to the South consisting of cotton in Texas, sugar beets in Colorado, and wheat in the San Joaquin Valley in California (Gonzales, 123). Mexican-Americans also comprised a large part of the mining and railroad labor in the South West. East of the Mid West, Irish, Chinese, Italian, African American and other minorities worked the factories, coalmines, farms and railroads that made the industrial revolution possible. Manuel G. Gonzales in his book *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* and Howard Zinn in his book *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* both paint a vivid image of the struggles of the people behind the scenes, who made the largest economic expansion in the United States possible but rarely shared in any of the benefits.

To fully comprehend what Chicano historians call “The Great Migration,” or the emigration of over one million Mexicans into the United States and why they chose to stay and face poverty and extreme prejudice, one must first look at the political turmoil that occurred in Mexico after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1846 (Gonzales, 113). After Mexican independence from Spanish control, “the presidency changed hands seventy-five times from 1821 to 1876” when the famous General Porfirio Diaz assumed the presidency and established “a one-man dictatorship, which he maintained until his ouster in 1911” (Gonzales, 115). In order to strengthen the Mexican economy that had weakened from years of internal conflict, Diaz turned to foreign investors like America and Britain to invest in Mexico’s mining and oil industries. This worked out great for Mexico at first but as the railroad system improve and the population soared, the standards of living decreased while product prices increased. Many villages were destroyed, as the youth moved to the cities to look for work and huge corporations bought out prime agricultural land. The native population was seen as primitive and opposing to progress, so much of their land was taken and redistributed to the Mexican Elite. The natives were then made to work in slave-like conditions on large haciendas. It is under these conditions that on 6 November 1911, Francisco Madero assumed presidency and was subsequently assassinated causing “a lengthy period of intermittent civil strife, at times bordering on chaos” (Gonzales, 118). The revolution that lasted until 1920 left the country in a sad state of affairs and the 1920s did not see much relief for most of the population. It is under these circumstances that Mexicans immigrated to the US in large numbers to escape the turmoil at home. While many Mexican immigrants planned on returning home after a short time in the US, many chose to stay and pave a better future for their children.

There were many differences but also many similarities between the Central and South American immigrants of the American South West and the Immigrants that arrived through Ellis Island on the East Coast. One thing that was certain however, was that all of these groups suffered greatly at the hands of the rich elite that were becoming richer and monopolizing the markets so that these marginalized citizens could fight back less and less. Although they did occupy other public service jobs, the overwhelming majority of Mexicans found jobs in the mining, railroad maintenance and agricultural industries which were famous for being grueling, hard, backbreaking work for which they received little pay (Gonzales, 121). There were especially many mining jobs in the South West mining for coal, silver, and copper. Mining was a dangerous job and although they were paid less than their White counterparts, the Mexican laborers endured and did their jobs.

By the 1920s, the Southwest was responsible for the majority of the fruit produced in the US, but unfortunately because of the inordinate costs of irrigation, only large corporations could afford to keep up with the rising demand for produce (Gonzales 123). With immigration acts imposed in the early ‘20s effectively stopping all European immigration, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans made the Journey North to fill that labor gap. Most Mexican immigrants lived off of very low wages and had to move seasonally with the produce making a large circle around the South West, from Texas to California and back. The living conditions of agricultural workers were horrible. They lived in labor camps that consisted of tents and shacks that often only had one bathroom for a hundred workers. Many laborers died from diseases that ran rampant due to poor living conditions (Gonzales 128). It is important to note one of the main differences between European and Mexican immigrants which was that “the overwhelming majority of Europeans entering the United States came expecting to become permanent residents…” whereas the Mexican immigrants tended to never sever their emotional ties with Mexico (Gonzales, 135). Being able to easily return to Mexico because of geographical closeness they tended to not fully assimilate. Mexicans had it harder than European immigrants for various reasons. Geographically, Europeans landed in the industrial Eastern cities, where they could stay in one place, save some money and eventually send their children to school. Mexicans on the other hand were peasants, travelling from one place to another and because of that, not able to move up from their lowly position in society. Lastly, Mexicans were dark-skinned and of non-European decent which left them at the hands of the extreme racism of those times. For these reasons and more, while other minorities rose into the middle class, Mexicans largely remain lower-class citizens.

With the start of the Great Depression, The US saw a huge wave of Mexicans and other rural laborers move to the cities where welfare and other benefits could be found. Some of the cities with the largest Mexican immigrant populations were San Antonio, El Paso, and Los Angeles, the latter being a special example of the urbanization of Mexicanos in the ‘30s. By 1930, Los Angeles had the second largest Mexican population in the world, only second to Mexico City itself (Gonzales, 142). Most of these immigrants resided in the barrios East of the Los Angeles River. During these hard Depression times, when almost everyone was suffering to some extent, Young Mexican men were often the targets of brutal police beatings. The police force was largely made up of Irish and other recently arrived European immigrants whose racism and competitiveness made Mexicans their targets. Although barrios are often viewed as dirty, dangerous places, they served as a sort of refuge where Mexicans could be around their own people, speak in Spanish, and go to Catholic Church, fiestas and other activities.

World War II offered the Mexican American community a chance to enter “the American mainstream” where between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexicanos served in the military (Gonzales, 164-165). Having little opportunity for education, this was a good opportunity for many to move upward in society. Many Mexicanos served with honor, notably Guy Louis Gabaldon who was actually raised by a Japanese-American family starting from his teenage years. During one of the bloodiest battles of the war on Saipan, already wounded by gunfire, Gabladon killed 33 enemy soldiers and was responsible for the capture of over 1500 more. Despite his superhuman, heroic actions, the US government never fully recognized his valor. Still, many cultural and racial boundaries were broken down during the war. With a common enemy to fight against and their lives on the line, soldiers’ racial and cultural boundaries were broken down and many interracial long-time friendships were created. Because of the G.I. Bill that was passed in 1944, many Mexicano veterans received benefits and were able to attend college. Many of these college graduates would later go on to become major Chicano civil rights activists such as, Americo Paredes, Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, and Octavio I. Romano among others (Gonzales 167).

America is a country of immigrants. No other group of immigrants has affected the Western half of the US and arguably the US as a whole as much as the Mexican immigrants. Throughout history, they have toiled through jobs and still are to this day toiling in jobs that others will not do. Without such a large source of labor to work in America’s vast agricultural system, one must wonder if America could be the international powerhouse that it is today.

Bibliography

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