

MEXICAN AMERICAN MIGRATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

What were the experiences of Mexican Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries? What challenges did they face? What communities, institutions, and culture did they create? What records and documents were left of their lives, and what were some reasons for the gaps in the record? There is no single Mexican American story, but rather multiple ones that primary sources can help illuminate.



Mexican girls, San Antonio, Tex.
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007660003/>

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were nearly 32 million people of Mexican origin living in the United States, of which approximately 37 percent were born outside the United States. Although Mexican Americans live in every state, a majority live in California, Texas, Arizona, Illinois, and Colorado. This broad, diverse population experienced—and also influenced—vast cultural and historical changes over the past two hundred years.

The Border and Immigration

Mexican Americans living in the southwestern states have said, “I didn’t cross the border, the border crossed me.” What do they mean by this? Much of the American Southwest was once Mexican territory. Many families in that area date their residency in the United States from the mid-19th century or before.

Texas, formerly part of Mexico, declared its

independence in the mid-1830s and ultimately joined the United States in 1845. Mexico did not immediately accept Texas’s independence, and tensions between the United States and Mexico grew.

Border skirmishes and a variety of political considerations eventually led to the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48), which ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In this treaty, the United States acquired more than 500,000 square miles of Mexican territory—all or part of the current states of Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and Texas. The United States purchased another 30,000 square miles of what is now Arizona and New Mexico in 1854, in what today is known as the Gadsden Purchase.

Approximately 80,000 people who defined themselves as Mexicans lived in the territories that

were ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Almost all of them stayed where they were living, promised that they would retain their property and civil rights and that they would become U.S. citizens in two years' time. Subsequent immigration from Mexico to the United States ebbed and flowed.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the discovery of gold and copper, and new jobs in ranching and agriculture, drew Mexicans to the United States. By 1900, about 500,000 people of Mexican ancestry lived in the United States, mostly in the Southwest. Of this population, about 100,000 were immigrants, but approximately 400,000 people were second, third, or fourth generation Americans.

Due to the provisions of the Reclamation Act of 1902, more land in the United States became agricultural. This increased the need for farmworkers and drew more Mexicans across the border. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its violent aftermath led even more Mexicans to emigrate to the U.S. Moreover, due to the growth of the U.S. economy in the 1920s, there were better-paying jobs in the United States than in Mexico.

Since the border between the United States and Mexico was essentially open until 1924, many migrants went back and forth freely between the two countries. Stable communities continued to grow. Traditions and institutions were enriched by the cultures of both nations, from religious services influenced by Mexican customs, to bilingual or Spanish-language newspapers. During the 1930s, however, the flagging U.S. economy and a forced repatriation program reduced the Mexican-American population.

World War II brought new labor shortages to the U.S., and a new temporary worker program, known as the "bracero" program. Braceros were Mexican

contract laborers, typically hired for short-term, agricultural labor. At the height of this program, which lasted until 1964, approximately 437,000 Mexican workers traveled annually to the United States for jobs. During and after the war, people of Mexican origin began to move beyond the Southwest to the industrial Midwest. In the postwar period, immigration continued, increasing and decreasing with economic swings and changes in immigration law and its enforcement.

Challenges

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo included provisions that appeared to protect the property rights of former Mexican citizens in the areas annexed by the United States. U.S. courts, however, failed to support those rights. Many of the new Americans lost their property in court decisions or were ruined by the costs of litigation.

In addition to the struggles over land, Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in the Southwest experienced discord. Friction was sparked, in part, by religious differences, economic rivalries and resentments, and ethnic prejudice and discrimination.

When immigration increased early in the 20th century, some workers blamed Mexican Americans and Mexican migrant workers for holding down wages in mining, agriculture, and other industries. The influence of nativist groups as well as the economic depression led to a forced repatriation program in the 1930s. Many people of Mexican origin who had been in the United States for years were forced to return to Mexico.

In the years following World War II, Mexican Americans faced a variety of other challenges. These included schools and other public facilities that were segregated, as well as poor conditions and lower pay in the economic sectors that employed many Mexican Americans.

The search for social justice also affected Mexican Americans. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had an impact on Mexican American struggles. The Chicano movement also began in the 1960s, when Mexican Americans advocated for equality as well as the restoration of land grants and other issues. The farmworkers' movement spearheaded by Cesar Chavez beginning in the early 1960s also brought attention to important issues such as compensation and working conditions.

Culture and Public Service

Americans of Mexican descent were been part of the fabric of American life throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, in small towns in the Southwest, in the industrial cities of the Great Lakes, and beyond. From the military to the arts, from politics to business, science, and more, the contributions of these earlier generations of Mexican Americans are an essential part of the American story. Some highly selective examples are:

- During World War II, about 350,000 Mexican Americans served in the U.S. military, with several receiving the Medal of Honor.
- Mexican Americans have served as members of the U.S. Congress, heads of cabinet departments, governors of states, members of state legislatures, mayors of cities large and small, and members of city councils. Representative Joe Baca served in the U.S. Congress for more than ten years, representing districts in California.
- Mexican Americans have excelled in all areas of the arts, including visual arts, the theater, music, literature, and dance. Today, writers such as [Sandra Cisneros](#) and [Pat Mora](#) and artists such as [Rafael López](#) continue to explore the creative legacy of a cultural heritage that crosses borders.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Print and copy the maps in this set to show the shifting borders of the U.S. First, ask students to observe the maps closely to determine what happened to the size of the United States between 1830 and 1860. How did the United States gain these new lands? Then, ask them to think about who lived in these areas at the time the United States annexed them.
- Working alone or with a partner, each student should form a hypothesis about what happened to the people in these areas. Next, they should look for evidence in the remaining documents in the set or elsewhere to support or refute their hypotheses. Finally, ask students to list their remaining questions. Where might they find answers?
- Make the documents in this set available to students. Organize students into small groups and ask each group to focus on finding evidence related to one of two topics: (1) aspects of Mexican culture that have been maintained in the Mexican American community and (2) attitudes of the dominant (Anglo- American) culture toward Mexican Americans. When they have located evidence, ask each group to write a statement summarizing what they learned from their exploration of the documents. Once each group has agreed on a statement, assign them to create a mural that illustrates their statement. They may use the murals in the set for inspiration.
- The documents available in this set do not cover all aspects of the history of people of Mexican heritage in the United States. In addition, many of the documents were created by people outside the group under study. Teachers may want more advanced students to examine the documents as representative of a fragmentary historical record. Why is the historical record incomplete? Why were so many documents created by people who were not Mexican Americans? What does thinking about these questions suggest about gaps in the historical record? What is the relationship of immigrant populations to the historical record?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Topics in Chronicling America - The Mexican Revolution

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/mexicanrevolution.html>



America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>



Prints and Photographs Division: Carol Highsmith Archive

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/highsm/>



Experiencing War: Hispanics in Service, Stories from the Veterans History Project

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-hispanicveterans.html>

PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



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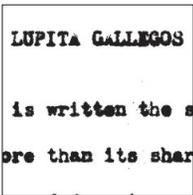
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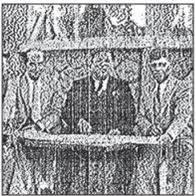


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Ellis, Pearl Idelia. *Americanization through Homemaking*. Los Angeles, CA: Wetzel Publishing, 1929. From Library of Congress: *Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929*.

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"Hidalgo Park Quiosco, Houston, Harris, TX," Drawing. c. 1933. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/tx0872.sheet.00001a/>



Julio Gomez Orchestra. "Paso Doble." Audio recording. February 18, 1939. From Library of Congress: American Folklife Center.

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Lee, Russell, photographer. "Making tortillas in bake shop, San Antonio, Texas." Photographic negative. Washington, DC. 1939. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

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