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Citizens or Strangers?: The 1930s Repatriation of Mexican and Mexican Americans

By Desiree Correa

Introduction

The 1930s in the United States are often remembered for the Great Depression, but it was also a period in which citizenship and legality were frequently questioned, even for one's own neighbors. During this decade, mass deportations of Mexican and Mexican American populations took place across the country in a process now known as the Mexican Repatriation. These efforts, carried out under President Herbert Hoover's administration and continuing into Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, were not the result of formal law. They emerged from federal pressure, local initiatives, and mass raids that disproportionately targeted individuals of Mexican descent, many of whom were U.S. citizens.¹

Under the guise of reducing unemployment during the Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly or coercively "repatriated" to Mexico, regardless of their legal status.² Overshadowed by later programs like the Bracero Program and Operation Wetback, the legacy of the Mexican Repatriation remains significant. Understanding how these mass deportations were allowed to occur provides critical insight into the role of race, citizenship, and economic scapegoating in U.S. history. A key question guiding this research is: What were the circumstances that led to the mass deportations of the Latino population in the 1930s? Studying

¹ Adam Goodman, "Coerced Removal from the Great Depression through Operation Wetback," in *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, (Princeton University Press, 2020), 37-38.

² Brian Gratton and Emily Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950," *The International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 947, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542812>.

these past injustices helps us recognize similar policies today. Historians generally attribute the mass deportations to the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the rise of nativist sentiment, often pointing to President Hoover's rhetoric, which scapegoated Mexican laborers for high unemployment. Historian Adam Goodman, for example, explains that budgetary restrictions during the Great Depression led the United States to adopt stricter policies, particularly along the Southern border.³ These pressures pushed the Immigration Service to target Mexican communities more directly, resulting in the mass repatriations of the 1930s.⁴ Historian Larisa L. Veloz supports Goodman's argument, adding that heightened nativism played a central role in fueling deportations. According to Veloz, "Americans" felt increasingly threatened by immigration and projected their economic and social anxieties onto immigrants, especially Mexicans.⁵

My approach, however, goes further by analyzing the institutions that enabled and enforced discriminatory policies, rather than focusing solely on racism as an abstract force. I argue that the Mexican Repatriation was not caused solely by racism or border security concerns, but rather by a convergence of long-developing economic, political, and social factors that culminated in the 1930s. Specifically, this paper contends that the Mexican Repatriation was shaped by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), early twentieth-century immigration policies, and labor movements of the same period. By examining the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the evolution of U.S. immigration policy, and the rise of labor movements, this

³ Goodman, "Coerced Removal from the Great Depression," 37-38.

⁴ Goodman, "Coerced Removal from the Great Depression," 37-38.

⁵ Larisa L. Veloz, "The Great Depression and The Great Return: Coming Home 1929-1936," in *Even the Women Are Leaving: Migrants Making Mexican America, 1890-1965*, (University of California Press, 2023), 92.

paper emphasizes how these forces collectively laid the groundwork for mass repatriation.

The Mexican Revolution and its Aftermath

Understanding the history of the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly the impact of the Mexican Revolution, is essential to explaining how political instability and displacement contributed to the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s. The outcome of the Mexican-American War in 1846, a conflict that ended with the United States acquiring a vast amount of western territory from Mexico through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, left the relations between the two nations tense. However, by the 1890s, relations began to stabilize. Much of this shift was due to Mexico's president at the time, Porfirio Díaz. Díaz successfully shifted the tides for Mexico in terms of economic and foreign development, earning recognition from Europe and America.⁶

Despite this period of progress, the peace did not last. By the early twentieth century, the citizens of Mexico grew discontent with Díaz's authoritarian control and lack of political freedom. This frustration is captured in the revolutionary 1911 book *El Triunfo de la Revolución*, published by Rafael Illán a year after the conflict began. Illán declared, "If Don Porfirio Díaz does not resign, the curse of all Mexico will fall upon him, because we... will follow the difficult path of rebellious outcry with weapons in hand until we achieve our anticipated goal."⁷ This unrest culminated in the Mexican Revolution, which spanned from 1910 to 1917, taking the lives

⁶ Benjamin C. Montoya, "The Basis for the Quota Drive Against Mexico," in *Risking Immeasurable Harm: Immigration Restriction and U.S.-Mexican Diplomatic Relations, 1924-1932*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 19.

⁷ Rafael Illán, *El Triunfo de la Revolución*, (Texas: "Imprenta Mexicana", 1911), 3-4. "Si Don Porfirio Diaz no dimite, sobre su cabeza caerá la maldición de todo México, pues nosotros con la razón por rodela y la justicia por lanza seguiremos la senda abrupta del grito subversivo con las armas en la mano hasta llegar al fin presentado." Translated by Author.

of an estimated 100,000 people.⁸ With Díaz fleeing the country, Mexico experienced a power vacuum, resulting in fighting and bloodshed.

This instability affected every aspect of life, including the family structure. Many families experienced disrupted dynamics, as they were displaced or lost members. The revolution reshaped the very idea of what a family could be. In many cases, families had to survive on whatever little they had, often lacking stable shelter, food, or resources. The photo below, dated March 13, 1914, captures a glimpse of this hardship as a Mexican family appears to be living in a tent, sharing clothing, and eating handmade tortillas. Their scant supplies reflect the reality many families faced as they tried to survive the revolution's chaos (see fig. 1).⁹ It is important to note, however, that this image was produced and circulated by U.S. observers, potentially framing Mexican poverty through an objectifying lens. While it reflects the difficult conditions faced by families, it also represents the ways outside audiences perceived and interpreted these hardships.



⁸ Miles V. Rodríguez, “Introduction,” in *Movements After Revolution: A History of People’s Struggles in Mexico*, (Oxford University Press, 2022), 6.

⁹ Horne, Walter H., [Mexican Family Sits to Eat #2], March 13, 1914, photograph, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph187929/>.

Figure 1. Mexican Family Sits to Eat. (Walter H. Horne, [*Mexican Family Sits to Eat #2*], March 13, 1914, photograph, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht187929/>.)

The conflict's impact also extended to the Southern U.S. border, prompting the United States to station military forces in response to raids led by Pancho Villa, a prominent revolutionary during this time period. Villa had gained notoriety for his 1916 raid on Columbus, New Mexico, where several Americans were killed. According to a government document, during this raid, "... between two and three thousand men attacked the village of Columbus N.M., ... burning several buildings and looting."¹⁰ As tensions between the two nations escalated in the mid-1910s, President Woodrow Wilson increased U.S. military presence along the border and launched the Punitive Expedition into Mexico to capture Villa and protect border relations between Mexico and the United States.¹¹

The turmoil in Mexico forced many to make difficult decisions, leading to mass migration. Between 1900 and 1910, Mexican nationals made at least 500,000 border crossings into the United States.¹² Despite the end of the revolution, the migration intensified, with annual figures reaching as high as 90,000 immigrants in 1925 alone.¹³ Contrary to popular belief, these migrants, who were described as young and single men traveling alone, did not intend to

¹⁰ "Return of casualties of the 13th U.S. Cavalry on the March 9, 1916, 'Pancho Villa' raid," March 9, 1916, Record Group 94: Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 300382, National Archives Catalog, Washington, DC. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300382>.

¹¹ David K. Work, "Enforcing Neutrality: The Tenth U.S. Cavalry on the Mexican Border, 1913-1919," *Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2009): 180-181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40505472>.

¹² Kelly Lytle Hernández, "The Early Years," in *Migra! : A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, (University of California Press, 2010), 25.

¹³ Gratton and Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950," 947.

permanently settle in the United States.¹⁴ They were often seeking higher wages to support families back in Mexico, and opportunities were often available along the border. This characterization of migrants as temporary, single men contributed to a U.S. perception of Mexican laborers as transient and expendable, laying the groundwork for policies in the 1930s that targeted Mexican-American families for deportation, even those with U.S.-born children. By framing these early migration patterns in this way, it becomes clear that the social and governmental attitudes toward Mexican migrants during and after the revolution influenced how birthright citizenship was often disregarded in later mass deportation efforts.

At the same time, economic conditions along the U.S.-Mexico border encouraged a cyclical pattern of migration. As American labor economist Marie T. Mora explains, “... around the turn of the century, an abundance of agricultural and mining opportunities along the U.S.-Mexico border, aided by the expansion of railroad, created an economic boom that lasted until the late 1920s”¹⁵ This economic growth gave many migrants a reason not only to stay but to return in cycles, allowing them to provide for themselves and their families. This cyclical migration pattern persisted through the early twentieth century, and well into the 1930s, shaping both the labor market and the social dynamics that would later influence U.S. immigration and deportation policies. Building on these repeated migration cycles, historical documentation, such as immigrant identification cards from the National Archives, further illustrates these trends. For instance, Florencio Aceves, a thirty-two-year-old migrant, aimed to enter the United States

¹⁴ Gratton and Merchant, “Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950,” 947.

¹⁵ Marie T. Mora, “Changes in Occupational Earnings along the U.S.-Mexico Border between 1900 and 1920,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 39, no. 4 (2005): 1043-59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4228206>.

through Calexico, California on August 16, 1930 (see fig. 2).¹⁶ These identification cards, issued starting July 1, 1928, by the U.S. consul, included personal details and intended destinations. This practice diminished by August 1940, but highlights the transient nature of Mexican migration during this period.¹⁷ While many migrants returned to Mexico, others found stability

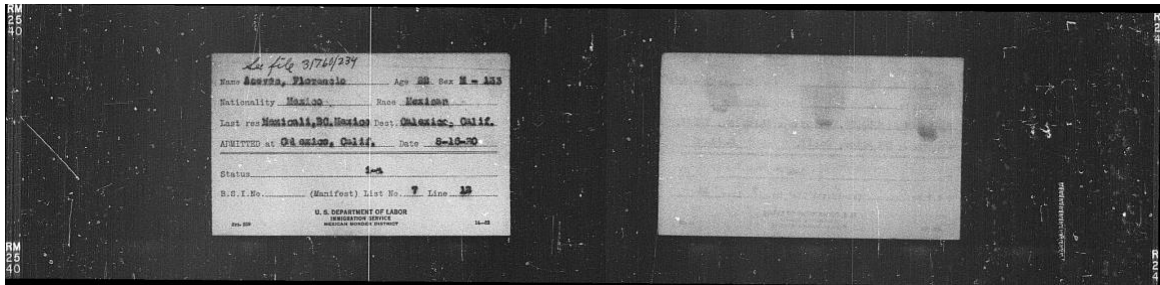


Figure 2. An example of immigration identification cards. (*Aceves, Florencio-8/16/1930*. August 16, 1930, photograph, National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/24772233>.)

and opportunity in the United States, leading to a growing Mexican and Mexican-American population. By 1930, 1.6 million individuals of Mexican origin lived in the United States, compared to just over 600,000 in 1910.¹⁸ However, this growth coincided with rising hostility. With the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, economic anxieties and increased competition for jobs fueled anti-Mexican sentiment. Mexicans became scapegoats for economic hardship, leading to repatriation campaigns and eventually mass deportations.

Building on the migration patterns set in motion by the Mexican Revolution, this period of forced deportations and voluntary returns underscored the racial and economic tensions that

¹⁶ “U.S. Department of Labor Card of Florencio Aceves, August 16, 1930,” 24772233, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives Catalog, Washington, DC.

¹⁷ “Lecture on Immigration and Naturalization Documents, Records, and Indexes,” May 1, 1943, 21621, File no. 165/217-B, INS Lecture Series 2 [1943], U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Camp Springs, MD.

¹⁸ Gratton and Merchant, “Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950,” 948.

defined the U.S.-Mexico relations during this era. While the Mexican Revolution involved political and social upheaval, this discussion focuses on its effects on migration patterns and U.S. perceptions, rather than revolutionary ideology. In examining the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, it becomes clear that the convergence of political instability, labor demands, and racial prejudice laid the foundation for the Mexican Repatriation. Anti-Mexican prejudice predated the Revolution, shaped by decades of land dispossession, systemic local violence, and exclusion from political power across the Southwest following Mexican independence and the Mexican-American War. The Revolution intensified and transformed these longstanding tensions. This is supported by border immigration records from Mexico to the United States which were considerably low, staying well below 22,000 migrants from 1880 until 1900.¹⁹ It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Mexicans began migrating to the United States in greater numbers, especially when looking at later decades, which saw as many as 83,205 migrants from July to December 1955.²⁰ Thus, the number of immigrants at the start of the twentieth century was relatively small compared to the overall population in later decades and the extended period it took to reach those figures.

This demonstrates how the political instability and social upheaval of the Mexican Revolution, along with the resulting migration, shaped American perceptions of Mexico and its people, portraying Mexican communities as both transient and potentially threatening. As immigration became an increasingly contentious issue, public attention shifted toward the Southern border, often placing blame on Mexican immigrants for broader social and economic

¹⁹ Gratton and Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950," 947.

²⁰ "Immigration and Naturalization Service Report of Field Operations, July to December 1955," (1955 Reports), 381634506, General Records of the Department of Homeland Security, National Archives Catalog, Washington, DC.

issues. The Mexican Revolution accelerated patterns of displacement and cyclical migration, resulting in a growing Mexican population in the United States. Mexican labor, while essential to key industries, became a primary target of blame, making Mexican communities especially vulnerable to exclusion and removal. In this way, these developments did not merely precede the Mexican Repatriation, but actively helped justify and enable the mass deportation campaigns of the 1930s. These migration patterns created large and visible Mexican communities throughout the American Southwest. When the economic crisis of the Great Depression struck in the 1930s, these same communities became the primary targets of repatriation campaigns that sought to remove Mexican laborers from the United States.

Evolving U.S. Immigration Policies of the Early Twentieth Century

U.S. immigration policies and government actions in the early twentieth century played a critical role in shaping the experiences of immigrant communities, laying the groundwork for the large-scale targeting and mass deportations of the Mexican and Mexican-American population during the Mexican Repatriation. Even though government officials, school districts, and local programs had been monitoring Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans since the 1910s through labor oversight, segregation policies, and “Americanization” programs, they became particularly visible in public discourse and statistical accounts by the mid-1920s.²¹ Rather than taking accountability for economic issues, the United States government chose to disrupt opportunities, livelihoods, and families to address an almost inescapable economic depression. Employers and government officials soon treated Mexican immigrant workers as disposable,

²¹ Gratton and Merchant, “Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950,” 948.

viewing them as “temporary” or even “replaceable” laborers. This racialization allowed the U.S. government and employers to exploit their labor while simultaneously scapegoating them for the economic turmoil of the Great Depression.

This period also marked a significant contraction in how whiteness was defined in the United States. As immigrant communities grew, racial categories extended beyond a simple Black-white binary, yet these expansions were accompanied by increased exclusion and discrimination. Those who were not considered white faced limited access to opportunities and social mobility, reinforcing a growing eugenics movement that shaped both immigration policy and public attitudes during this time.

The rise of anti-Mexican rhetoric in newspapers and political campaigns further intensified hostility, portraying Mexican immigrants as job stealers and threats to American stability. Many newspapers echoed the government’s sentiments. For instance, when addressing the deportation of alien criminals in his annual message to the Senate and House of Representatives, President Hoover remarked, “... thousands of persons have entered the country in violation of the immigration laws... I recommend that the Congress provide methods of strengthening the Government to correct this abuse.”²² This statement fueled sensationalist headlines. One such article titled, “County Saves Large Sum by Mexican Repatriations,” highlighted how Los Angeles County in California saved more than two million dollars in taxpayer money by deporting over 36,000 Mexicans.²³ The article framed these deportations as beneficial for unemployed American workers and advocated for further removals. These

²² President Hoover, speaking on the Economic Situation, on December 2, 1930, 71st Cong., 3rd sess., *Congressional Record* 74, pt. 1: 36.

²³ “County Saves Large Sum by Mexican Repatriations,” *Monrovia News-Post*, March 4, 1933, 4.

portrayals not only reflected public sentiment, but also reinforced the idea that Mexican immigrants were responsible for economic instability, further legitimizing exclusionary policies and later enforcement practices.

Building upon the growing nativist sentiment of the early twentieth century, the evolving legislation reveals that the United States strategically weaponized immigration policy to marginalize and scapegoat immigrant communities. The *Immigration Act of 1924* laid the foundation for racial exclusion, yet the roots of this exclusion can be traced back to the landmark Supreme Court case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*. Decided on March 25, 1898, this case centered on a child born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents who permanently resided in the country.²⁴ The Supreme Court ruled that the child was a U.S. citizen by birth, citing the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”²⁵ This decision established birthright citizenship as a constitutional right, protecting all individuals born on American soil, regardless of race or heritage. However, the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s exposed the government’s blatant disregard for this precedent. Under the guise of addressing economic instability during the Great Depression, local and federal officials forcibly deported not only Mexican immigrants but also Mexican Americans who were U.S. citizens by birth. This mass deportation campaign demonstrated the government’s selective and racially motivated application of the law, directly violating the constitutional protections established in *Wong Kim Ark*.

²⁴ *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 169, U.S. 649, 649 (1898).

²⁵ U.S. Constitution, amend. 14, sec. 1.

Similarly, the *Immigration Act of 1924* was another piece of legislation that played a pivotal role in shaping U.S. immigration policy and set the stage for future exclusionary measures. It exemplified the standards that were originally set by *Wong Kim Ark*. While the law aimed to regulate immigration, its provisions worked to control and channel migration into narrow and highly monitored pathways. It introduced key policies, such as the establishment of immigration visas, a formal distinction between “quota” and “non-quota” immigrants, and, most notably, gave rise to the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol.²⁶ These measures reflected the growing concerns over regulating migration and reinforced the federal government’s authority in controlling who could enter the country. Understanding the *Immigration Act of 1924* is essential to recognizing the shifting focus of the U.S. immigration enforcement in the years leading up to the Mexican Repatriation.

The *Immigration Act of 1924* established strict immigration policies that shaped future U.S. immigration laws. A key provision of the act outlined visa distribution, requiring immigrants not only to obtain a visa but also to comply with border patrol regulations for its use. Notably, under the subtitle, “Immigration Visas” Section F, the act was deliberately vague, granting officials broad discretion to deny entry. As stated in the bill:

No immigration visa shall be issued to an immigrant if it appears to the consular officer, from statements in the application, or in the papers submitted therewith, that the immigrant is inadmissible to the United States under the immigration laws....²⁷

This ambiguity allowed the U.S. government to reject applicants more easily while also enhancing border surveillance. To clarify, the law primarily aimed at limiting European immigration. It did not impose restrictions on all U.S. borders, such as the Southern border,

²⁶ Immigration Act of 1924, Pub. L. No. 68-138, 43 Stat. 153 (1924).

²⁷ Immigration Act of 1924, § F.

where Mexican migration had been increasing. However, following the act's implementation, Mexican immigration dropped significantly, falling under 40,000 migrants according to the U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration, or around 20,000 migrants as per U.S. Census data.²⁸ While this decline is not directly linked to the act, it suggests a shifting landscape in U.S. immigration policy and foreshadows more stringent restrictions in the future.

The act distinguished between quota and non-quota immigrants, further shaping the nation's immigration framework. In the subtitle, "Definition of 'Immigrants'" Section 3, the act defines an immigrant as, "... any alien departing from any place outside the United States destined for the United States,"²⁹ It further clarifies that non-quota immigrants, those exempt from visa limits, faced fewer restrictions, while quota immigrants encountered stricter limitations on obtaining and renewing visas. These restrictions aligned with the U.S. government's broader goal of tightening immigration controls. This intent was explicitly stated by W.W. Husband, the Commissioner General of Immigration at the time, in a February 9, 1924 newspaper clipping from Washington D.C. Husband remarked, "To-day the word immigration is rather commonly associated with the idea of filth and crime and paupers and undesirables generally. If we can cut down the flow of immigrants...the term immigration will take on a better meaning."³⁰

Such rhetoric reinforced the growing perception of immigration as a societal threat. The term "undesirables" was later formalized in legislation, such as the *Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929*. Husband, frequently quoted in the article, openly expressed bias in favor of Northwestern

²⁸ Gratton and Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950," 947.

²⁹ Immigration Act of 1924, § 3.

³⁰ "Immigration Quota on Naturalization Basis is Proposed, 9th February," 1226235, Box 5611, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives Catalog, Washington, DC.

European immigrants, and emphasized their supposed superiority in building the United States. These discriminatory views were part of a larger framework that shaped future anti-immigrant campaigns, particularly against Mexicans. Although this act and the discourse surrounding it are often overlooked, they played a crucial role in shaping U.S. immigration policy. Without this law, the establishment of later border security measures and their lasting enforcement at the Southern border might have unfolded differently. Overall, the *Immigration Act of 1924* demonstrates the government's significant role in shaping public attitudes toward immigration. While the act primarily targeted European immigration, it also laid the groundwork for another key policy: *Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929*.

Prior to the mid-1920s, national policies and public discourse largely targeted Asian and European immigrants, portraying them as economic threats and cultural outsiders. However, as restrictions tightened on those groups, attention increasingly turned toward Mexican immigrants. One example of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment can be seen in a letter from a Pittsburgh resident to James J. Davis, the Secretary of Labor during the 1920s. Written on March 5, 1928, four years after the implementation of the *Immigration Act of 1924*, the letter reflects the writer's support for a bill, which aimed to restrict Mexican immigration. The resident expresses approval of Davis's stance, stating, "... Detroit is flooded with them [Mexicans]; - in fact they are to be found in every bity town ... I think they are the worst type of immigrant."³¹ This letter illustrates the widespread hostility toward Mexican immigrants and highlights the growing racial tension that intensified as the United States approached the 1930s.

³¹ "Letter to James J. Davis, Secretary of Labour, on the Box Bill," 5 March 1928, 1226235, Box 5611, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives Catalog, Washington, DC.

The *Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929* had a direct impact on Mexican Repatriation, as it focused on the Southern border, criminalizing and restricting Mexican immigration to the United States. Senator Coleman Livingston Blease strongly advocated for the act, though some employers opposed it, recognizing that Mexican labor remained essential to the agricultural industry. As a compromise, the *Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929* specifically penalized those who entered the country illegally through unauthorized ports of entry. Violators faced fines, imprisonment, or deportation.³² The timing of this law coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, which marked a turning point in U.S. immigration policy.

Although deportation was not always the intended consequence of illegal entry, the economic crisis led the government to forcibly repatriate many immigrants. Immigration raids increased, and individuals unable to prove their legal status, both Mexicans and Mexican Americans, were deported.³³ This demonstrates how early twentieth-century immigration policies not only regulated migration but also helped construct Mexican immigrants as expendable, shaping both public perception and the government's actions that culminated in the Mexican Repatriation. These immigration laws expanded the federal government's ability to monitor, categorize, and police migrant populations. When the economic crisis of the 1930s intensified demands for job protection, these legal and bureaucratic tools made it far easier for authorities to carry out the mass repatriation campaigns that targeted Mexican communities.

The Rise of Labor Movements in the Early Twentieth Century

³² "Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929 (Blease's Law)." Immigration and Ethnic History Society, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/undesirable-aliens-act-of-1929-bleases-law/>.

³³ Immigration and Ethnic History Society, "Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929 (Blease's Law)."

Labor movements in the early twentieth century played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward Mexican workers, contributing to the economic pressures and nationalistic rhetoric that fueled the Mexican Repatriation. At the same time, the United States was rapidly becoming an economic superpower, fueled by growing industrialization and urbanization. However, this transformation was not achieved in isolation. Mexican immigrants, along with other immigrant groups, had long been vital to the U.S. labor force, particularly in agriculture. This heavy reliance on immigrant labor laid the groundwork for future tensions, contributing to the conditions that eventually led to mass deportations.

The fast pace of urbanization also reshaped the labor landscape, prompting the rise of powerful labor movements and unions. These organizations played a critical role in protecting the workers who were helping to build the modern United States. Unions not only fought for better wages and working conditions but also served as a defense against widespread exploitation. A key example was the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905. It rivaled the American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886, and was a dominant labor union at the time, by offering workers a sense of purpose, shelter, and low membership fees.³⁴ Unlike other unions, the IWW was seen as an organization created by and for the workers themselves, making it especially appealing to various laborers and quickly gaining support.

It was in this evolving labor environment that the first waves of Mexican immigrants arrived. Labor, and its value, existed in a gray area that corporations often exploited. Many Mexican immigrants, whether seeking seasonal or long-term work, were unfamiliar with labor protections, making them particularly vulnerable to mistreatment by employers. A key event in

³⁴ Robert L. Tyler, "I. W. W. in the Pacific N. W.: Rebels of the Woods," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1954): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20612131>.

labor history that reflects these struggles is the Wheatland Hop Riot, which took place on August 3, 1913, in Wheatland, a small city of under 3,000 residents located about 15 miles from Yuba City in Northern California. By this time, the IWW had established a presence in California, though its membership remained small, fewer than 5,000 members statewide and less than 8% of migratory laborers. Despite its size, the IWW's activism drew opposition from business owners and lawmakers, who sought to suppress radical labor organizing by passing laws that criminalized union activities and labor strikes that were perceived as disruptive. It was these legal efforts that played a role in the events leading up to the riot.³⁵

The Wheatland Episode took place at Durst Ranch, which was California's largest employer at the time due to its enticing advertisements that drew thousands of workers. The ranch hired laborers regardless of nationality, valuing them for their perceived efficiency and the ease with which they were exploited for lower wages. Women and children were also commonly employed making up nearly 50% of the labor force as well.³⁶ Despite the ranch's large workforce, working and living conditions were far from adequate. Laborers who arrived seeking work were met with, "...intolerable sanitary, housing, and working conditions and a wage-payment system on a piece-rate and bonus basis ranging from 90 cents to \$1.90 a day..." (see fig. 3).³⁷ This immediately sparked outrage, especially among members of the IWW.

³⁵ Woodrow, C. Whitten, "The Wheatland Episode," *Pacific Historical Review* 17, no. 1 (1948): 37-38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3634767>.

³⁶ Don Mitchell, "Labor and Landscape: The Wheatland Riot and Progressive State Intervention," in *The Lie of the Land*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 36-37.

³⁷ Whitten, "The Wheatland Episode," 38. *Hop Workers Camp*, 1913, photograph, 90 x 135 mm, CSU Chico Digital Collections, <http://archives.csuchico.edu/digital/collection/coll11/id/21069/rec/6>.



Figure 3. Hop Workers Camp. (*Hop Workers Camp*, 1913, photograph, 90 x 135 mm, CSU Chico Digital Collections, <http://archives.csuchico.edu/digital/collection/coll11/id/21069/rec/6>.)

When the harvest season began in August, a group of workers confronted the ranch owner, demanding better conditions, including, “... drinking water to be furnished in the fields twice a day, improved sanitary conditions in the camps, especially separate toilets for men and for women, and \$1.25 a hundred [payment per 100 units].”³⁸ As tensions escalated, the owner refused to meet their demands, ultimately leading to the violent events of August 3, 1913. That day, the sheriff and his deputies arrived at the ranch to disperse a workers’ meeting. The growing crowd became more agitated, and a deputy on the outskirts of the crowd fired shots into the air in an attempt to restore order. Instead, violence erupted, resulting in a clash that left four people dead, including two laborers.

Notably, an examination of news coverage following the event reveals that the deaths of the two laborers were largely ignored. Reports primarily focused on the officials who were killed. For instance, a clipping from the *Windham County Observer*, reads, “E.T. Manwell,

³⁸ Whitten, “The Wheatland Episode,” 39.

district attorney and two deputy sheriffs killed in riot at Wheatland hop fields today.”³⁹ There was no mention of the laborers who also lost their lives, a pattern reflected across many newspapers at the time. This selective reporting highlights the social position of laborers, whose lives were seen as less valuable than those of the authorities who sought to suppress their cause.

In the aftermath, detectives were dispatched across California to arrest protest participants. These individuals faced brutal treatment and were denied basic legal rights. For example, a man by the name of Alfred Nelson was arrested by one of these detectives. During this time, Nelson was moved from one city to another before finally residing in Contra Costa County. Although he was never allowed to seek counsel or be formally charged, he was held in the county jail for several hours before being taken to a hotel room, where detectives beat him to force a false confession.⁴⁰ As reported by the *El Paso Herald*, “Nelson was supposed to know who killed district attorney Manwell and deputy sheriff Riordan in the recent hop field riots at Wheatland.”⁴¹ With so little media attention given to people like Nelson, the door remained open for others to be mistreated in the same way.

Of all the individuals arrested, four were eventually put on trial. Two of them were convicted of second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder, and were sentenced to life

³⁹ "Late Happenings Told in Tabloid," *Windham County Observer*, August 6, 1913.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92051419/1913-08-06/ed-1/seq-8/#date1=1756&sort=date&rows=20&words=hop+riot+Wheatland&searchType=basic&sequence=0&index=3&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=Wheatland+hop+riot&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, “Labor and Landscape: The Wheatland Riot and Progressive State Intervention,” 41.

⁴¹ “Detective Held for Assault,” *El Paso Herald*, September 22, 1913.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88084272/1913-09-22/ed-1/seq-5/#date1=1756&sort=date&rows=20&words=hop+riots+Wheatland&searchType=basic&sequence=0&index=4&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=Wheatland+hop+riot&y=23&x=13&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

in prison.⁴² The trial and convictions highlighted the harsh realities faced by labor movements in the early twentieth century, exposing the risks laborers took in fighting for better working conditions. The Wheatland Episode itself had lasting consequences, fueling both changes in California's agricultural labor practices and the broader labor movement. Moreover, the Commission of Immigration and Housing was formed to investigate labor conditions and submit annual reports that, as one account stated, "...bring light to deplorable housing and sanctuary conditions in labor camps throughout the state."⁴³ This prompted further investigations by the Federal Commission on Industrial Relations and bolstered support for the IWW.

The growing labor movement extended beyond California. On September 28, 1913, just over a month after the August 3rd incident, prominent labor leader Vincent St. John addressed a public protest held in Chicago. Speaking before a crowd of fellow IWW members and supporters who had organized in solidarity with the Wheatland Hop Pickers, St. John rallied workers to unite against widespread injustices facing agricultural laborers. As one of the founding members of the IWW and a former metal miner himself, St. John deeply understood the hardships these workers endured.⁴⁴ In his speech, he directly condemned the exploitative practices of the Durst Brothers. He stated that:

The Durst Brothers [owners of the farm], who profited by using the labor power of these 2,500 men and women, were not concerned whether the latter had a roof over their heads where they labored or not. ... Durst Brothers maintain a commissary and every worker in these hop fields was supposed to buy his supplies from this commissary at whatever price Durst Brothers chose to charge for the same. And you may be sure the provisions were sold at the highest

⁴² Whitten, "The Wheatland Episode," 39.

⁴³ Whitten, "The Wheatland Episode," 40.

⁴⁴ "Vincent St. John: Associate of 'Big Bill' Haywood Dies in San Francisco," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1929.

possible prices, while being the very cheapest the bosses could find on the market.⁴⁵

This speech reflected the widespread frustration among laborers and underscored the broader push for better conditions. However, while the movement gained traction, it also sparked backlash from farmers who pushed for restrictive laws against the IWW, intensifying conflicts on the labor front.⁴⁶ Many Mexicans had already moved to the United States, either permanently or temporarily, in search of better opportunities. A significant number of migrants were not only seeking economic opportunity, but were also shaped by the social and political upheaval of the Mexican Revolution. Many carried with them a heightened awareness of labor rights and, in some cases, prior exposure to activism, which influenced their willingness to organize and challenge exploitative working conditions in the United States. While some found solidarity in labor unions, others faced exploitation, harsh working conditions, and employer resistance to their organizing efforts. As strikes and union activity increased, frustration among employers grew, further deepening resentment toward migrant laborers. This escalating tension contributed to growing anti-immigrant sentiment, as Mexican workers were increasingly viewed not only as economic competitors, but also as sources of labor unrest. In this context, the Wheatland Hop Riot was not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of labor unrest during this period, reflecting growing tensions between employers and migrant laborers.

The early twentieth century saw the exploitation of Mexican workers, which increased their visibility within key industries. As the labor tensions rose, particularly through organizing

⁴⁵ Vincent St. John, "The Wheatland Victims: Speech at a Protest Meeting for the Wheatland Hop Pickers: Chicago - Sept. 28, 1913," *Solidarity* 4, no. 40 (1913): 2, <http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/unions/iww/1913/0928-stjohn-wheatland.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Whitten, "The Wheatland Episode," 42.

efforts and strikes, Mexican workers came to be viewed as both essential and expendable. The economic crisis of the Great Depression further intensified these perceptions, allowing employers and government officials to justify their removal. In this way, labor conflicts and economic dependency did not simply precede the Mexican Repatriation, but actively shaped it, as these tensions were used to justify immigration raids, forced removals, and large-scale deportation campaigns throughout the 1930s.

The Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s

William N. Doak, who served as Secretary of Labor under President Herbert Hoover, played a central role in organizing and publicizing deportation campaigns as a solution to rising unemployment during the Great Depression. The Hoover administration, supported by Doak, argued that so-called “illegal aliens” had taken jobs from U.S. citizens, framing deportation as a way to restore economic stability. As a result, immigration agents were deployed, particularly in Southern California, to carry out raids targeting Mexican communities. However, as Professor Francisco E. Balderrama demonstrates, these efforts were not carefully limited to undocumented individuals.⁴⁷

Contemporary newspaper coverage reinforced and amplified these efforts by framing deportation as both necessary and justified.⁴⁸ Reports frequently referred to Mexican migrants as “aliens” and emphasized their alleged role in worsening unemployment, contributing to a climate

⁴⁷ Francisco E. Balderrama, “The Deportation-Repatriation Campaign Against La Raza,” in *In Defense of La Raza: The Los Angeles Mexican Consulate and the Mexican Community, 1929 to 1936* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1982), 32-34.

⁴⁸ “Repatriation of Mexicans to Be Studied,” *San Bernardino Sun* (San Bernardino, CA), Jan. 7, 1933.

of fear and uncertainty.⁴⁹ In many cases, articles failed to distinguish between undocumented individuals, legal residents, and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, further legitimizing indiscriminate enforcement practices.⁵⁰ This media framing not only reflected public sentiment, but also helped normalize the widespread targeting of Mexican communities during the repatriation campaigns.

Although relatively few undocumented individuals were formally detained at first, these campaigns ultimately had a far broader impact. Many Mexican families, including those with legal status or citizenship, chose to leave the United States out of fear and uncertainty. Los Angeles County became a central site for these departures, as trains transported thousands to Mexico during the height of the repatriation campaigns.⁵¹

As Historian Natalia Molina argues, these events were made possible by earlier racial constructions that positioned Mexicans outside the boundaries of full belonging. Despite legal ambiguities following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans were not consistently recognized as white, and instead came to occupy a racialized category that marked them as both foreign and expendable.⁵² This categorization created significant challenges for immigration authorities, who struggled to classify individuals of Mexican descent within existing legal frameworks.⁵³ By the 1930s, as immigration restrictions tightened and border enforcement

⁴⁹ “Governor Supports Alien Deportation,” *Imperial Valley Press* (El Centro, CA), Mar. 30, 1938.

⁵⁰ Balderrama, “The Deportation-Repatriation Campaign,” 32-34.

⁵¹ Balderrama, “The Deportation-Repatriation Campaign,” 38-39.

⁵² Natalia Molina, “‘What is a White Man?’: The Quest to Make Mexicans Ineligible for U.S. Citizenship,” in *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 56-57.

⁵³ Molina, “‘What is a White Man?’,” 60.

increased, these racialized assumptions became further embedded in policy. In this context, the economic pressures of the Great Depression did not create anti-Mexican sentiment, but rather activated existing ideas that framed Mexican labor as temporary and removable. As a result, repatriation campaigns were not merely reactive measures but part of a longer process through which officials sought to define and control Mexican populations within the United States.⁵⁴

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the Mexican Repatriation was not simply a response to economic crisis, but the result of earlier migration patterns, labor exploitation, and racialized assumptions that made Mexican communities particularly vulnerable to removal.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the Mexican Repatriation alongside the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), early twentieth-century immigration policies, and labor movements reveals the interconnected conditions that made the mass deportations of the 1930s possible. The instability caused by the Mexican Revolution initiated patterns of displacement and migration, bringing thousands of Mexican laborers into the United States in search of economic opportunity. As this population grew, so too did its visibility, particularly within industries that depended heavily on their labor.

At the same time, rising nativist sentiment and restrictive immigration policies, such as the *Immigration Act of 1924* and the *Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929*, worked to define Mexican migrants as both necessary and undesirable. Labor movements further intensified these tensions, as Mexican workers who organized for fair treatment were increasingly seen as threats rather than contributors. Events like the Wheatland Hop Riot demonstrated that demands for labor

⁵⁴ Molina, ““What is a White Man?,”” 72-73.

rights were often met with repression, reinforcing the perception of Mexican workers as expendable.

By the onset of the Great Depression, these economic, political, and social pressures converged. Mexican communities, once valued for their labor, became convenient scapegoats for widespread unemployment and instability. The Mexican Repatriation was not a sudden or isolated response to the economic crisis, but rather the culmination of years of migration patterns, labor exploitation, and exclusionary policies that made the removal of Mexican and Mexican-American populations both possible and publicly acceptable. This contradiction did not end with repatriation. In the decades that followed, the United States continued to demonstrate an ambivalent relationship with Mexican labor, revealing a pattern of exclusion and dependence. The Bracero Program allowed the United States to recruit Mexican laborers for agricultural work while maintaining the ability to send them back once their labor was no longer needed. It lasted from 1942 until 1964. The long-term effects of such labor programs are preserved in the voices of those who lived them. The University of Texas at El Paso conducted an oral history project documenting the experiences of “braceros,” or laborers, including Héctor Solís Fuentes. Born in Hidalgo, Mexico, Fuentes was the fifth of nine children and had worked in agriculture his entire life before joining the Bracero Program in 1953. That year, he traveled to California, where he harvested crops such as almonds and tomatoes.⁵⁵ Once he began the program, Fuentes initially believed he was working under fair conditions and that his contract guaranteed him proper wages. Unfortunately, the reality was far worse than this. Like many other braceros, Fuentes was unaware of terms in his agreement. He recalled:

⁵⁵ Héctor Solís Fuentes, Oral Interview, in discussion with Violeta Domínguez, Mexico City, Mexico, July 10, 2002.

And then we were seeing that this one was carrying a contract for three months, and at that time because one did not realize, until today we are realizing that if we had claimed, they would have made us valid the three-month contract and would have compensated us.⁵⁶

What Fuentes described is how many laborers, unable to read their agreements, simply followed employers' orders. As a result, employers took advantage of this vulnerability, manipulating agreements to avoid properly compensating workers.⁵⁷

The U.S. government also maintained strong control over the program. For instance, in a letter rejecting a request to bring in 300 Mexican nationals to harvest pears, officials emphasized that such labor could only be approved if there were not enough domestic workers available, and only if hiring foreign laborers did not lower wages or working conditions for American farmworkers.⁵⁸ This reveals how the United States prioritized its own economic interests, limiting Mexican laborers' entry unless it directly benefited domestic agricultural needs. This systemic exploitation echoed earlier injustices, such as those seen in the Wheatland Episode, where Mexican laborers were easy targets for abuse. While labor movements led by the IWW provided some support, they were not a complete solution for migratory workers who often entered the country unaware of their rights and available resources. In this instance, America targeted the vulnerable and used this to its advantage, foreshadowing a larger pattern of exclusion and discrimination that followed. This cycle of exploitation and exclusion reveals that

⁵⁶ “‘Y luego estábamos viendo de que este llevábamos un contrato por tres meses, y en aquel tiempo pues uno no se daba cuenta, hasta hoy nos estamos dando cuenta que si nosotros hubiéramos reclamado, nos hubieran hecho válido el contrato de tres meses y nos hubieran indemnizado.’” Translated by Author.

⁵⁷ Fuentes, Oral Interview.

⁵⁸ “A Denied Request for ‘300 Mexican nationals’ to harvest pears, issued by the US Department of Labor,” 1960, 29 July 1960, Mexican Labor and World War II: The Bracero Program, Digital Public Library of America, Boston, MA. <https://dp.la/item/4f595f82e26504a393a7aeb773fc3472>.

the treatment of Mexican laborers was not temporary, but deeply embedded within U.S. economic and social structures.

Despite its magnitude, the Mexican Repatriation remains overshadowed in public memory. Yet its legacy endures. The same patterns of scapegoating, legal inconsistency, and racialized exclusion continue to shape immigration policy and public discourse. Understanding this history is not simply an act of reflection, but a recognition of how deeply rooted these systems are. Without confronting the conditions that made repatriation possible, the structures that enabled it remain intact.

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