

removed from the County Hospital in Los Angeles and carted across the line. But those who once agitated for Mexican exclusion are no longer regarded as the puppets of union labor.

What of the Mexican himself? The repatriation programme apparently, is a matter of indifference to this amiable ex-American. He never objected to exploitation while he was welcome, and now he acquiesces in repatriation. He doubtless enjoys the free train ride home. Probably he has had his fill of bootleg liquor and of the mirage created by pay-checks that never seemed to buy as much as they should. Considering the anti-social character commonly attributed to him by the sociological myth-makers, he has cooperated nicely with the authorities. Thousands have departed of their own volition. In battered Fords, carrying two and three families and all their worldly possessions, they are drifting back to el terenaso – the big land. They have been shunted back and forth across the border for so many years by war, revolution, and the law of supply and demand, that it would seem that neither expatriation or repatriation held any more terror for them.

The Los Angeles industrialists confidently predict that the Mexican can be lured back, "whenever we need him." But I am not so sure of this. He may be placed on a quota basis in the meantime, or possibly he will no longer look north to Los Angeles as the goal of his dreams. At present he is probably delighted to abandon an empty paradise. But it is difficult for his children. A friend of mine, who was recently in Mazatlan, found a young Mexican girl on one of the southbound trains crying because she had to leave Belmont High-School. Such an abrupt severance of the Americanization programme is a contingency that the professors of sociology did not anticipate.

Source: *American Mercury*, March 1933.

9 President's Commission on Migratory Labor, the Bracero Program and Undocumented Workers, 1951

The plight of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression was bleak. In Crystal City, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, the average family income was \$506 a year – at a time when authorities considered a subsistence income to be between \$2,000 and \$2,500. Less than one Mexican American child in five completed five years of school.

The New Deal did little for Mexicans and Mexican Americans who lived in rural areas or worked in agriculture. This was the case despite the efforts of the Farm Security Administration to improve the lot of farm workers; it drafted

and persuaded Congress to adopt laws outlawing child labor and setting minimum wages and maximum hours for adult workers. But the National Labor Relations Act did not extend to farm workers its guarantee of the right to organize unions, and the Social Security Act excluded them from its programs of unemployment compensation and old age insurance. Landlords took advantage of New Deal farm policies to evict tenants and sharecroppers from the farms they were working and replace them with mechanical cotton pickers and other equipment.

World War II, however, created renewed demand for Mexican American farm workers. To meet this demand, in 1942 Mexico and the United States initiated, by executive agreement, a program to allow Mexican braceros (laborers) to enter the United States as short-term contract workers, primarily in agriculture and transportation. Before the program ended in 1947, an estimated 200,000 braceros worked in 21 states, about half of them in California.

The program was resurrected by Congress in 1951, largely because of agricultural shortages created by the Korean War. It continued until 1964, peaking in 1959 when nearly 450,000 braceros entered the United States. In 1960 braceros formed 26 percent of the nation's seasonal agricultural labor force. Even after the program's termination, Mexican workers could enter the US by green cards that permit temporary employment.

In practice, neither legal immigration nor the Bracero Program met the need for labor in agriculture, construction, or domestic service. The desire to escape poverty and underemployment in Mexico and the attraction of higher wages and greater economic opportunities in the United States led an increasing number of undocumented workers to enter the United States – workers who had to avoid government border patrols and live under the constant threat of deportation.

In 1951 a presidential commission on migratory farm labor discussed the plight of undocumented agricultural workers.

Before 1944, the illegal traffic on the Mexican border, though always going on, was never overwhelming in numbers. Apprehensions by immigration officials leading to deportations or voluntary departures before 1944 were fairly stable and under ten thousand per year. . . .

The magnitude of the wetback traffic has reached entirely new levels in the past seven years. The number of deportations and voluntary departures has continuously mounted each year, from twenty-nine thousand in 1944 to 565,000 in 1950. In its newly achieved proportions, it is virtually an invasion. It is estimated that at least 400,000 of our migratory farm labor force of 1 million in 1949 were wetbacks. . . .

an "invasion"

Bracero Program

wetback

Farmers in the northern areas of Mexico require seasonal labor for the cotton harvest just as do the farmers on our side of the Rio Grande. There is, accordingly, an internal northward migration for this employment. American farm employers in need of seasonal labor encourage northward migratory movements within Mexico.

This rapid economic development in the areas immediately south of the border has accelerated the wetback traffic in several ways. An official in Matamoros estimates that twenty-five thousand transient cotton pickers were needed in the 1950 season, whereas the number coming from interior Mexico was estimated at sixty thousand. It is to be expected that many Mexican workers coming north with the anticipation of working in northern Mexico do not find employment there and ultimately spill over the border and become wetbacks....

Although smuggling of wetbacks is widespread, the majority of wetbacks apparently enter alone or in small groups without a smuggler's assistance. In a group moving without the aid of a smuggler, there usually is one who has made the trip before and who is willing to show the way. Not infrequently the same individual knows the farm to which the group intends to go and sometimes he has made advance arrangements with the farm employer to return at an appointed date with his group. Such wetbacks stream into the United States by the thousands through the deserts near El Paso and Calexico or across the Rio Grande between Rio Grande City and Brownsville....

Well-established practices to facilitate and encourage the entrance of wetbacks... range from spreading news of employment in the plazas [of Mexican towns and cities] and over the radio to the withholding from wages of what is called a "deposit" which is intended to urge, if not guarantee, the return to the same farm as quickly as possible of a wetback employee who may be apprehended and taken back to Mexico.

The term "deposit" requires some explanation. Members of this commission personally interviewed wetback workers apprehended by immigration officers in the lower Rio Grande Valley. These workers had been paid for the cotton they had picked during the preceding two or three weeks. However, their employers had withheld \$10 to \$15 from their pay. Such sums, we discovered, are known as deposits. To redeem this deposit, the wetback was required to re-enter illegally and to reappear on the farm employer's premises within ten days.

Once on the United States side of the border and on the farm, numerous devices are employed to keep the wetback on the job. Basic to all these devices is the fact that the wetback is a person of legal disability who is under jeopardy of immediate deportation if caught. He is told that if he leaves the farm, he will be reported to the Immigration Service or that,

equally unfortunate to him, the Immigration Service will surely find him if he ventures into town or out onto the roads. To assure that he will stay until his services are no longer needed, his pay, or some portion thereof, frequently is held back. Sometimes, he is deliberately kept indebted to the farmer's store or commissary until the end of the season, at which time he may be given enough to buy shoes or clothing and encouraged to return the following season.

When the work is done, neither the farmer nor the community wants the wetback around. The number of apprehensions and deportations tends to rise very rapidly at the close of the seasonal work period. This can be interpreted not alone to mean that the immigration officer suddenly goes about his work with renewed zeal and vigor, but rather that at this time of the year "cooperation" in law enforcement by farm employers and townspeople undergoes considerable improvement....

Wages for common hand labor in the lower Rio Grande Valley, according to the testimony, were as low as 15 to 25 cents per hour.

Source: *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951).

10 A Migratory Farm Worker Testifies Before Congress, 1951

In 1951 and 1952, migratory farm workers testified before Congress. An excerpt from the testimony follows. The consequence of such testimony was to encourage a massive effort to deport undocumented Mexican workers, known as Operation Wetback.

- Q Where is your home in Texas?
 A Weslaco, Tex. (Lower Rio Grande Valley).
 Q Why don't you stay down around Weslaco and work down there?
 A Well, I don't stay there because I can't make any money over there in that town.
 Q What is the reason you can't make any money there?
 A Well, because there is a lot of laborers in that town and they can't get any work. This year they promised to pay 75 cents an hour. You can go anywhere to look for a job and you can't find any job....
 Q Who promised you 75 cents?
 A Well, on the radio, I listen to the radio, and they took all the Nationals back to Mexico and so want to raise the price for us, but I and my

Matamoros

brothers, my two brothers, was looking for a job all the way around the town and they couldn't find any, and myself started to work about 20 days after I got there, and I got started to get some people to get ready to come to Montana with me.

Q I want to ask Mr. F— about these Mexican Nationals in Texas. You say that you couldn't make any money there and wages were too low, there weren't any jobs because there was an abundance of other workers?

A Yes.

Q Were those other workers Mexican Nationals that came across the river?

A Yes, sir; they crossed the river, and they worked for 3 or 4 days, dollar a day, two dollars and a half, and there is the reason we can't get jobs.

Q You mean they paid them two dollars or two and a half?

A Two and a half or three dollars.

Q For how many hours?

A Ten hours.

Q They are getting about 25 cents an hour?

A Yes.

Q You spoke about Mexican Nationals. Do you happen to know whether those are wetback Mexicans, or were those contract Mexicans that were brought in under the Government program? Which of those two was it that took most of the work around Weslaco?

A Well, it is Mexicans that is from Mexico. They just crossed the river, and that is the reason they got a lot of laborers there in that town, and they don't get any jobs for us on farm labor.

Source: *Migratory Labor. Hearings before Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations. 82nd Congress, 2nd Session.*

11 George Stith, Operation Wetback, 1952

Between 1950 and 1955, the federal government launched a massive effort to round up and deport undocumented workers, termed wetbacks or mojados because many had crossed the Rio Grande river to reach the United States. During the period, the federal government carried out 3.8 million expulsions (some Mexicans may have been expelled more than once). Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. claimed that the operation was to prevent the entrance of subversives. Highly publicized in advance, Operation Wetback was meant to encourage undocumented aliens to leave voluntarily as well as to deport them. In 1954, a million undocumented workers were returned to Mexico. Many were shipped across the border without recourse to due process. A symbol of

the new attitude toward Mexican immigration was the construction of a barbed-wire fence along the border during the 1950s. The Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana was established in 1950 to prevent the separation of family members and the expulsion of people who had lived in the United States for many years.

In the following selection, a native-born farm worker complains about competition from foreign laborers in 1952 Congressional hearings. George Stith was an agricultural worker on a Gould, Arkansas, cotton plantation.

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The importation of Mexican nationals into Arkansas did not begin until the fall of 1949. Cotton-picking wages in my section were good. We were getting \$4 per 100 pounds for picking. As soon as the Mexicans were brought in the wages started falling. Wages were cut to \$3.25 and \$3 per 100 pounds. In many cases local farm workers could not get jobs at all. . . . I think there were about 25,000 Mexican nationals hired in 1949. In 1950 there was a small crop of cotton but more Mexicans were brought in to pick cotton and it was all picked out before the end of October. The cotton plantation owners kept the Mexicans at work and would not employ Negro and white pickers.

Source: *Migratory Labor. Hearings before Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations. 82nd Congress, 2nd Session.*

12 Juanita Garcia, The Plight of Migrant Farm Workers, 1952

Juanita Garcia, a migratory farm worker in California's Imperial Valley, tells Congress that she was fired because she was a member of a labor union. In her testimony, she decries competition from labor from Mexico.

I work in the field and in the packing sheds. I lost my job in a packing shed about two weeks ago. I was fired because I belonged to the National Farm Labor Union. Every summer our family goes north to work. We pick figs and cotton. My father, my brothers and sisters also work on farms. For poor people like us who are field laborers, making a living has always been hard. Why? Because the ranchers and companies have always taken over.

When I was a small kid my dad had a small farm but he lost it. All of us used to help him. But dad got older and worn out with worries every day. Lots of us kids could not go to school much. Our parents could not afford the expenses. This happened to all kids like us. Difficulties appear here and

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there every day. Taxes, food, clothing, and everything go up. We all have to eat. Sometimes we sleep under a leaky roof. We have to cover up and keep warm the best way we can in the cold weather.

In the Imperial Valley we have a hard time. It so happens that the local people who are American citizens cannot get work. Many days we don't work. Some days we work 1 hour. The wetbacks and nationals from Mexico have the whole Imperial Valley. They have invaded not only the Imperial Valley but all the United States. The nationals and wetbacks take any wages the ranchers offer to pay them. The wages get worse every year. Last year most local people got little work. Sometimes they make only \$5 a week. That is not enough to live on, so many people cannot send their children to school.

Many people have lost their homes since 1942 when the nationals and wetbacks started coming. Local people work better but wetbacks and nationals are hired anyway.

Last year they fired some people from the shed because they had nationals to take their jobs. There was a strike. We got all the strikers out at 4.30 in the morning. The cops were on the streets escorting the nationals and wetbacks to the fields. The cops had guns. The ranchers had guns, too. They took the wetbacks in their brand-new cars through our picket line. They took the nationals from the camps to break our strike. They had 5,000 scabs that were nationals. We told the Mexican consul about this. We told the Labor Department. They were supposed to take the nationals out of the strike. They never did take them away.

It looks like the big companies in agriculture are running the United States. All of us local people went on strike. The whole valley was hungry because nobody worked at all. The melons rotted in the fields. We went out and arrested the wetbacks who were living in caves and on the ditches and we took them to the border patrol. But the national scabs kept working. Isn't the Government supposed to help us poor people? Can't it act fast in cases like this?

Source: *Migratory Labor. Hearings before Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations. 82nd Congress, 2nd Session.*

Chapter 9 La Causa

Approximately 350,000 Mexican Americans served in World War II, suffering casualties far above their proportion in the population. They were among the US's most decorated ethnic group (as they were during World War I, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War), winning 17 medals of honor.

During the war, the Spanish-Speaking People's Division of the federal Office of Inter-American Affairs developed programs to instill cultural pride among Mexican American children. School districts established vocational training classes to prepare graduates for jobs in wartime industry. Under intense government pressure, Mexican Americans secured jobs previously denied them, as in Texas's growing petroleum industry.

World War II marked a major turning point in Mexican American history. It ignited a heightened political consciousness within the Mexican American community. The new activist mood was apparent in the establishment of two important political organizations in 1947: the GI Forum in Texas and the Community Service Organization in California.

There was much to be activist about. A volume published in 1947 described Mexican Americans as the nation's "step-children." The facts were stark. In San Antonio, the number of infant deaths was three times that of Anglos. Of 70,000 migrant agricultural workers in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, 60,000 had no toilets, 10,000 used ditch water for drinking, and 33,000 had no bathing facilities.