BECOMING MEXICAN AMERICAN

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

George J. Sánchez

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CHAPTER 2

Across the Dividing Line

The most prevalent image of the American West is, of course, the frontier—an image fixed in American history by Frederick Jackson Turner, but popularized since by a host of writers. The frontier has always projected one myopic vision, that of the East looking West, civilization looking toward chaos, Europe looking toward the rest of the world. It casts the Euro-American as conqueror of both nature and foreign peoples, sometimes depicted as "savages," and speaks to the belief that the young American country would know no bounds in fulfilling its destiny to become the world's leading nation. It serves as a continuation of the story of migration to the New World, depicting the movement west as a destiny just as manifest as the momentous undertaking of crossing the Atlantic was a mission of redemption.

A concept of the border has had no comparable chroniclers among American historians for obvious reasons. The international border suggests limitations, boundaries over which American power and might have little or no control. It implies a dual vision, that of two nations looking at each other over a strip of land they hold in common. It acknowledges that at least two distinct peoples meet in this region, neither having the certain destiny of cultural and military superiority, and with conflict being an ever-present historical possibility. While "frontier" evokes an image of expansive potentialities, "border" speaks to what is real and limiting between nations and peoples.

The border, however, is also a social construct and has a distinct history. Simply demarking a line in the desert or a point on a river which designates the jurisdiction of two governments does not address the social and cultural significance assigned to that spot. It fails to account for the complex cultural and economic relationships that intertwine two countries when they share a common border. Moreover, the relationship between the United States and Mexico is further complicated by the fact that the northern side of this legal boundary was once held by the Republic of Mexico. As movement across this boundary increases, both sides have a vested interest in "creating" and "recreating" the border to suit the new social and economic realities of the region. The first four decades of this century saw the border socially invented, in its modern version, to meet the needs of both governments.[1]

This chapter will address the impact of the social construction of the border in the early twentieth century upon the migrants who crossed it, particularly focusing on the border crossing at El Paso–Juárez, the major entry point of those on their way to Los Angeles in this period. First, the means by which migrants left their hometowns and arrived at the border will be discussed. The effects of this burgeoning mobility on border communities were massive, creating both labor conduits for direct migration to the U.S. and new and expanded settlements that would serve as future sending points for migrants north. Finally, the changes which marked the actual border crossing from 1910 to 1924 will be analyzed, with particular attention paid to the transformation of the process in the minds of Mexicans who chose to cross this line of demarcation.

The massive migration across the United States–Mexican border in the early twentieth century did not occur simply because of individual decision-making and vague notions of economic opportunity to the north. Rather, it began as a highly organized movement to provide the American Southwest with substantial labor from Mexico's populous central plateau area. Because the climate and topography of the central plateau was most suitable for agriculture, Mexico's population had been concentrated here since before the Spanish conquest, as the arid north and tropical south provided less opportunity for successful farming. Government policies during the nineteenth century also encouraged the concentration of urban populations in relatively few centers, particularly around Mexico City and Guadalajara. The centrality of village life kept most Mexicans rooted in the areas where they were born.

The linking of the nation by the railroad network, coupled with economic policies during the Porfiriato which discouraged small-scale agriculture, created the impetus for the movement of people from central Mexico. The specific recruitment patterns of American railroad companies, however, set the mass migration of the early twentieth century in motion. Though contrary to American law (the Alien Contract Labor Law of 1885), recruitment in the Mexican interior mobilized individuals ready to take advantage of new opportunities. Once started, migration took on a life of its own, departing from its original pattern and evolving throughout the twentieth century in unprecedented fashion.

Initial movement often resulted from overt attempts to contract labor in Mexico. In 1910 the supervising inspector for the Immigration Service in El Paso, F. W. Berkshire, was forced to admit that "the contract labor law has been flagrantly and openly violated in the past and that Mexican immigration was largely solicited a few years ago." He be-

lieved, however, that the practice of actively recruiting laborers within Mexico had been checked by the Immigration Service since 1908.[2] A thorough report prepared in 1910 by Inspector Frank R. Stone described one method by which these early migrants were recruited, a tactic confirmed by all the railroad conductors in the area:

> On the Guadalajara Division of the Mexican National Railway, running from Guadalajara to Irapuato, in the state of Jalisco, my investigation discloses the fact that it was a common occurence *[sic]* for a labor contractor from the United States to stand on the rear platform of a North-bound train and as it passed through the various villages, at the depots of which were gathered a great many laborers employed on the adjacent haciendas, exhort these laborers to come to the United States, depicting the conditions obtaining and the comparitively *[sic]* high wages paid there; and this agent would later collect such peons as desired to come to the United States shipping them out in large gangs, paying their transportation to Juárez; even furnishing their bridgetoll over the Rio Grande to El Paso; giving them instructions regarding the responses they should make to questions asked them by our officers.[3]

In Mexico, an overabundance of labor was a distinct economic advantage for employers. It allowed them to keep wages low and workers pacified. Any threat to this labor supply was quickly rebuffed. Consequently, most of the states and many of the municipalities of west central Mexico established regulations prohibiting the contracting of laborers within their jurisdiction. These regulations were enforced to prohibit laborers from leaving for the United States and for work in other states in Mexico. For example, the mayor of the city of Guanajuato, an important hacendado himself, went so far as to have contracted peons physically thrown off trains and placed in jail.[4]

Of course, these measures could not put an end to the movement north. Even the actions of the Guanajuato mayor were circumvented by laborers who went to Silao, the next railroad station, and there purchased tickets to Juárez. Rather, once the practice of contracting laborers stopped, the initial recruitment seemed sufficient to create momentum for increased movement north. El Paso supervisor Berkshire observed that "it does not appear that it is necessary for such [recruitment] tactics to be resorted to at the present time, as the Mexican aliens who have come to the United States, secured employment, and after a period returned to their homes in Mexico, have so diffused the information that wages and living conditions are so far superior in the United States to Mexico that the influx has by these natural means increased from year to year." In order to aid these "natural means," industrial and agricultural employers in the United States continued to encourage their employees to write home and pass on information to induce immigration.[5]

In fact, most villages that sent these early migrants north from central Mexico experienced the return migration that Berkshire described. For example, in 1910 Inspector Stone conducted a four-day investigation

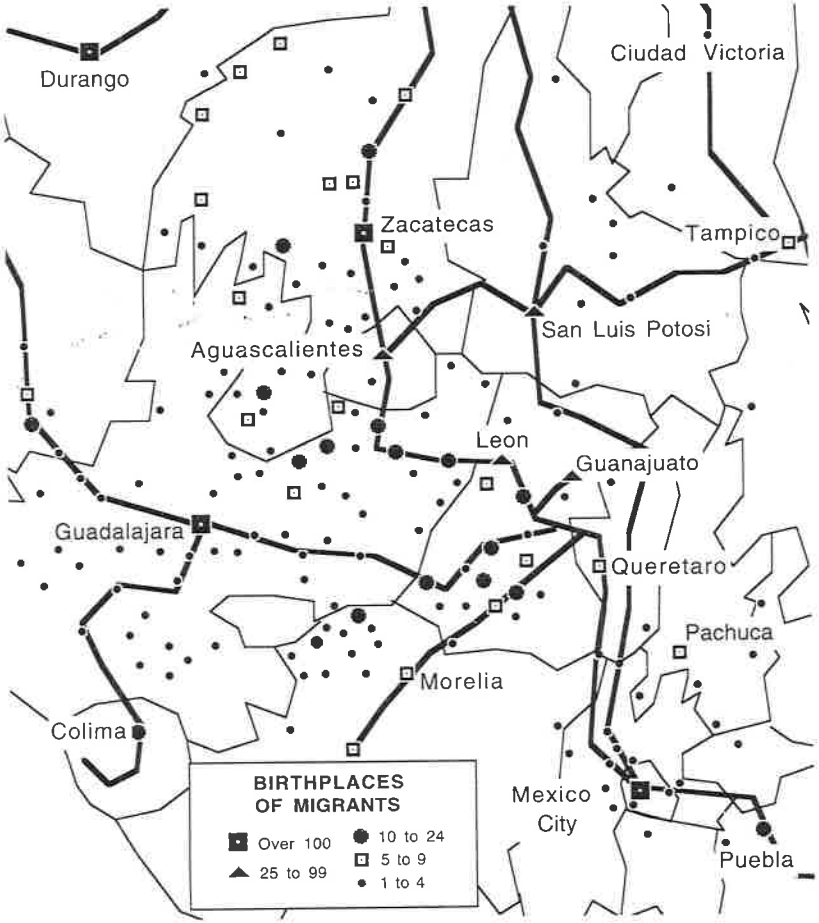
in the railroad office in Zamora, Michoacán. Among the 639 people he interviewed who were on their way to the United States, 30 percent (189) had been in the United States before, and an additional 386 individuals were accompanying them. Only 84 of the total had neither first-hand nor secondhand knowledge of the United States, and, consequently, only a relatively small number of Mexicans from a given community were migrating north with no information about their destination.[6]

Paul Taylor also observed that the attitude of those who had experience in the United States was decidedly more positive than those who had never been north. Despite some stories of police brutality or racial prejudice, "the agreeable aspects of their experience in the United States far overshadowed the disagreeable." What was noted by almost all was the standard of living—the possibility of nice clothes and automobiles, along with the pleasant public parks and comfortable housing.[7] The exchange of this form of information could only increase the likelihood that others would join the migrant stream.

Mexicans who migrated to the United States generally came from families engaged in years of creative adaptation to adversity, and were therefore keen on this sort of information. Unlike European immigrant families, whose movement into American society could best be described as chain migration, Mexican families were much more likely to be involved in a pattern of circular migration. Although most European immigrant groups also had high rates of return migration, ranging from 25 to 60 percent, only Mexicans exhibited a pattern of back-and-forth movement that would continue for years.[8] Men ventured north across the border to engage in seasonal labor, then returned south for a period of a few months or a couple of years. If economic circumstances once again necessitated extra cash, the circular pattern began anew. During World War I and up until 1921, the United States government contributed to this pattern by giving entrance visas to temporary workers in order to regulate their movement back into Mexico at the end of a season.

Invariably, adult men formed the bulk of the initial migrants from each village and town in Mexico. In 1910, for example, immigration officials in El Paso reported 35,886 Mexican aliens admitted, almost all of them obstensibly for temporary sojourns of less than one year. Women over the age of fifteen numbered 2,442 (6.8%) of the total, and most of them were probably spouses of male immigrants or the grown children of migrating parents.[9] Relatively few single women unattached to a family unit ventured north during this period. The only significant exceptions to this pattern were nuns fleeing religious persecution in Mexico during the 1920s and high school and college students, usually from the wealthier families of Mexico's urban centers.[10] Family migration, which grew in importance during the Mexican Revolution and the 1920s, was the context in which most women came to Los Angeles.

Consequently, any discussion of immigration from Mexico during



Map 3 Birthplaces of Mexican Migrants from the Bajío Region of Mexico
Source: Naturalization Documents, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, California.

these years must begin with the migration of male laborers. Family migration, described more thoroughly in Chapter 6, was a very important, but secondary process. Although these two forms of migration significantly overlapped chronologically, male migration usually occurred first, both at the level of the individual family and village.

Male migration fell into three distinct patterns. First, young single men came who hoped to relieve their family's dire economic situation in Mexico. Married men formed a second group of migrants who desperately needed to help their families by working in the United States and sending money home to their wives and children. Finally, some males arrived in the United States in family groups, either as children or as heads of households who brought their entire families with them.

Many who made it to the United States had originally intended to move only within Mexico. The country's growing urban centers attracted former rural peasants who sought various employment as a way to earn extra income. For example, from 1900 to 1930, the populations in cities such as Guadalajara and Aguascalientes grew over 175 percent, as nearby campesinos tried their luck in the city. Several cities rapidly became centers of commerce and manufacturing on the west central plateau, largely because they benefited from the direct connections to the capital and the north via rail lines. Other towns in the Bajío region bypassed by major rail connections lost population, and their markets were limited to the immediate region (see Map 3). León fell from being the nation's fourth largest city in 1900 to eighth place in 1921; Guanajuato, eighth in 1900, dropped to 27th; Querétaro fell from 13th to 19th. These centers were also greatly affected by the disruption of economic activities during the Mexican Revolution. The flow of refugees from the countryside particularly aided the growth of Mexico City, as it accounted for 60 percent of the nation's urban growth from 1910 to 1921. The capital consistently attracted rural villagers from throughout central Mexico, and its population multiplied threefold between 1900 and 1930.[11]

Others left haciendas and small villages to earn extra cash by working on irrigation projects, in mines or factories, or with the railroads. In particular, railroads used the enticement of higher wages to attract workers, paying between 25 and 75 cents per day, depending on the availability of labor. As a result, hacendados found it necessary to raise the pay scale to keep campesinos from abandoning the fields altogether.[12] For many migrants, these floating labor communities served as points of transition from a familiar, highly structured, rural, local environment to a more geographically mobile and urban atmosphere. No wonder American Protestant missionaries, searching for vulnerable locales where the hold of Catholicism over the populace could be broken, established their first congregations close to the new railroad depots, mines, and textile factories of the Bajío region. It was among laborers experiencing such dislocating change that the message of personal responsibility and individual discipline appeared to be most attractive.[13]

For a certain percentage of those who moved to Mexican cities or began work on Mexican railways, that first move signaled the beginning of a pattern of mobility which eventually led them to the United States. For example, Julian Ruiz, a resident of the small town of Calvillo, decided at age seventeen to move thirty miles to the city of Aguascalientes. Julian had quit school at the age of fourteen, and could scarcely read and write, so Calvillo presented few opportunities for him besides the two or three pesos a week he received from his storeowner brother. As a night clerk in an Aguascalientes hotel, Ruiz frequently encountered tourists and businessmen passing through town who extolled the virtues of life in the United States. After five years in Aguascalientes, he continued his migration, which ended in southern California. Using his sisters' savings

Table 3. The Migrant Journey of Adult Male Mexicans

	Number	*Percent*
Migration directly from place of birth	487	41.8
Migration from state of birth (but not same birthplace)	151	13.0
Migration from region of birth (but not same birth state)	67	5.7
Migration from regions north of region of birth	262	22.5
Migration from regions south of region of birth	87	7.5
Unknown	111	9.5
Total	1,165	100.0

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

for the trip, Julian Ruiz set out in 1923 for a border crossing at El Paso and eventual life as an agricultural laborer in California's citrus fields.[14]

Ruiz's pattern of migration north was typical. An analysis of naturalization records for adult male migrants to Los Angeles revealed that up to 58.2 percent of the Mexican immigrants surveyed began their journey from home by making an interim stop in a Mexican town or city (see Table 3). In addition to a general movement toward urban areas, Mexican internal migration was characterized by a pronounced movement to the northern border states. Much of the railroad construction took place in the north, as did the increasing mining activity of the early twentieth century. Northern Mexican employers, facing a shortage of labor, consistently offered higher wages to draw workers from the south. At the same time, these industries were faced with competition from employers across the border, a fact that also contributed to higher wages and continued labor shortages. Many Mexican laborers whose original intention was to earn the higher wages on the Mexican frontier found themselves, after a few years, ready to seek even higher pay by venturing across the border.

In fact, most of the Mexicans who came to Los Angeles during the late nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth were residents of a contiguous border region. During this period, Mexican communities from Tijuana to Piedras Negras were transformed from isolated outposts to important ports of exchange for trade and labor between Mexico and the United States. For example, El Paso del Norte, renamed Ciudad Juárez in 1888, remained unimpressive as late as 1884. One scholar describes its physical appearance that year:

Table 4. Population Growth in the Cities of the Border, 1900–1940

Mexico-U.S. pairs	*1900*	*1910*	*1920*	*1930*	*1940*
Ciudad Juárez, Chih.	8,218	10,621	19,457	39,669	48,881
El Paso, Texas	15,906	39,279	77,560	102,421	96,810
Nogales, Sonora	2,738	3,117	13,445	14,061	13,866
Nogales, Arizona	–	3,514	5,199	6,006	5,135
Nuevo Laredo, Tam.	6,548	8,143	14,998	21,636	28,872
Laredo, Texas	13,429	14,855	22,710	32,618	39,274
Mexicali, B.C.	–	462	6,782	14,842	18,775
Calexico, Calif.	–	797	6,223	6,299	5,415
Piedras Negras, Coah.	7,888	8,518	6,941	15,878	15,663
Eagle Pass, Texas	–	3,536	5,765	5,059	6,459
Tijuana, B.C.	242	733	1,028	8,384	16,486
San Ysidro, Calif.	–	–	–	–	–
Matamoros, Tam.	8,347	7,390	9,215	9,733	15,699
Brownsville, Texas	6,305	10,517	11,791	22,021	22,083

Source: Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), 161.

> Its main avenue was crossed by nine smaller streets on which were located adobe homes, vineyards, orchards, and empty lots. The business sector consisted of three main establishments which sold clothes, groceries, drugs, hardware goods, and other items, in addition to small shops which specialized in foods and meats. A small hotel, described by a contemporary observer as "dirty and unhealthy," and the usual artisan shops also formed part of the landscape.[15]

Within a few years, the town had grown tremendously. Once again, the railroads played a major role in the expansion of Juárez and other border communities. (See Table 4 for population growth in the early twentieth century.) Railroad lines first linked the Mexican interior to Matamoros in 1882, Nogales and Nuevo Laredo in 1888, and Piedras Negras in 1892. Often, however, the connection of these communities to the American side occurred earlier than its rail link to the Mexican interior and remained more important from an economic standpoint. The first railroad to reach the El Paso–Juárez area, for example, was the Southern Pacific in 1881. This link to Los Angeles was followed by the Atchinson-Topeka-Santa Fe line originating to the north and the Texas-Pacific and the Galveston-Harrisburg-San Antonio from the east. All three of these lines were completed by 1883. Construction of the Mexican Central and Mexican National Railways proceeded simultaneously from the border area southward and from the interior northward. Thus, residents of Juárez could travel directly to California via the railroad well before they were linked to Mexico City in March 1884.[16]

Table 5. Origins of Adult Male Mexican Immigrants

	From naturalization records[a]		*From money orders from California*[b]	
Mexican states	*Number*	*Percent*	*Rank*	*Percent*
Chihuahua	160	14.4	7	4.7
Jalisco	126	11.3	2	21.1
Sonora	119	10.7	10	1.7
Zacatecas	115	10.4	4	8.5
Distrito Federal	92	8.3	6	5.0
Guanajuato	88	7.9	1	22.9
Durango	72	6.5	5	7.3
Sinaloa	53	4.8	9	2.6
Coahuila	39	3.5	11	1.6
Michoacán	36	3.3	3	16.0
Aguascalientes	35	3.2	8	2.7
Baja California	25	2.3	13	1.0
San Luis Potosí	22	2.0	16	0.5
Veracruz	21	1.9	17*	0.3
Nuevo León	19	1.7	19	0.2
Puebla	15	1.4	20*	0.2
Colima	10	0.9	12	1.1
Hidalgo*	9	0.8	20*	0.2
Nayarit*	9	0.8	14	0.9
Oaxaca	8	0.7	23	0.1
Tamaulipas	7	0.6	15	0.6
Guerrero	6	0.5	17*	0.3
Chiapas*	5	0.4	25	0.1
México*	5	0.4	24	0.1
Yucatán*	5	0.4	27*	0.0
Querétaro	4	0.3	22	0.2
Campeche*	2	0.2	27*	0.0
Tlaxcala	2	0.2	27*	0.0
Morelos*	1	0.1	26	0.1
Quintano Roo	1	0.1	27*	0.0
Tabasco	0	0.0	27*	0.0
Total	1111	100.0	—	100.0

[a] RG 21, National Archives, Laguna Niguel, Calif.

[b] Adapted from postal money orders from California during January 1927. See Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (1930, rpt., New York: Dover, 1971), Table X, p. 17.

*Tie

The railroads did not provide the only stimulus to economic development. The policies of the Mexican government helped as well. Since the east-west lines which brought products to and from the east and west coasts were all on the American side of the international boundary, each of the landlocked border towns on the Mexican side found themselves at a great disadvantage. Together, they were utterly dependent on their American counterparts for outlets to potential markets, and remained only auxiliary partners in a burgeoning new international trade complex. In January 1885, after considerable debate, the Mexican government decided to extend the free trade privilege, previously instituted only in the state of Tamaulipas, along the entire length of the border for a distance of twenty kilometers from the boundary line. Merchants capitalized on this new situation by shipping goods from around the world through the United States without paying custom duties, and consequently they sold items in the *Zona Libre* at greatly reduced prices. With this new commercial incentive, the growth of Mexican border towns was accelerated, attracting workers from the Mexican interior and merchants from the American side. In one year, the value of exports transported through El Paso del Norte (Juárez) increased from $2.5 million to $8.7 million. Similar advances occurred throughout the border area.[17]

Many of the families of migrants who settled permanently in the United States first took up residence in the Mexican northern states during this period of economic boom. During the Porfiriato, the states of Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, and Sonora consistently drew large numbers of migrants, while México, San Luis Potosí, Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas were among the states yielding the greatest number of migrants.[18] This population redistribution laid the groundwork for twentieth-century migration from the Mexican border states. Sons and daughters of such internal migrants, and sometimes the migrants themselves, gradually ventured onto American soil when conditions seemed opportune. Table 5 indicates that permanent settlers in the United States (as represented by those who sought naturalization) often had been born in the northern states of Chihuahua and Sonora, while other migrant-sending states produced both permanent settlers and temporary immigrants.[19]

Rapidly changing economic conditions often served as impetus for further movement. In 1891, responding to heavy criticism from the United States and from competing regions in Mexico, the Mexican government amended the Free Trade Zone legislation by imposing heavy duties on goods manufactured within the zone and shipped to the interior. This move resulted in conditions which proved so restrictive that trade between the frontier and the rest of Mexico was effectively cut off. Moreover, the government imposed first a 10 percent and then an 18 percent tariff on all foreign goods entering the zone. To add to the north's economic woes in the 1890s, the worldwide depreciation in the value of silver devalued the peso from 92 cents to the American dollar in 1890 to 40 cents in 1897. All of these conditions contributed to a huge increase in the cost of living at the border, prompting many to cross over to the United States. The Juárez area, which had reached a population of roughly 29,000 in the Free Zone period, saw its numbers dwindle to

Table 6. Ports of Entry of Adult Male Migrants to Los Angeles

U.S. port	*Mexican bordertown*	*Number*	*Percent*
Land ports			
El Paso, Texas	Ciudad Juárez, Chih.	679	58.3
Nogales, Arizona	Nogales, Sonora	196	16.8
Laredo, Texas	Nuevo Laredo, Tam.	88	7.5
Calexico, Calif.	Mexicali, B.C.	31	2.7
Naco, Arizona	Naco, Sonora	30	2.6
Eagle Pass, Texas	Piedras Negras, Coah.	24	2.1
Douglas, Arizona	Agua Prieta, Sonora	23	2.0
San Ysidro, Calif.	Tijuana, B.C.	15	1.3
Columbus, N.M.	Las Palomas, Chih.	4	0.3
Other land ports	–	13	1.1
Sea Ports			
San Diego, Calif.	–	17	1.5
San Francisco, Calif.	–	14	1.2
New York, N.Y.	–	10	0.9
Galveston, Texas	–	6	0.5
New Orleans, La.	–	3	0.2
Other sea ports	–	2	0.1
Unknown or unlisted	–	10	0.9
Total		1,165	100.0

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

8,218 by 1900. In Piedras Negras the population declined by 5,000, and Nogales and Matamoros experienced similar losses.[20]

Despite this turn of events, the north continued to attract workers from the interior of Mexico because of its higher wages. The chronic shortage of labor and the keen competition for workers with employers from the American Southwest forced many companies to offer wages consistently higher than the rest of the nation.[21] By 1900, common laborers earned an average of 23 cents (U.S.) a day in the interior, compared with 88 cents in Juárez, while some made $1.00 or $1.50 a day near the border. Northern railroad companies provided the best pay, with the Mexican Central the leader in this regard.[22]

Once in the north, however, workers soon realized that the high cost of living and erratic job opportunities ate away at their wages, and many soon learned to reevaluate their decision. Particularly after the turn of the century, this unstable economic situation forced many to seek better wages, stable working conditions, and lower living costs across the border. Ciudad Juárez, and to a lesser extent Nogales, were thereby transformed into major labor conduits, initially luring workers north but often becoming simply stepping stones for further migration into the United States. While each of the border communities grew steadily during the first four decades of the twentieth century, they also assumed an

equally important role as temporary depots for international migration. At any given moment between 1900 and 1940, Ciudad Juárez, Nogales, or Nuevo Laredo contained a large proportion of newly arrived residents who did not intend to stay (see Table 6). Some made their way north across the international border, while others returned to the interior after time in the United States.

These were frontier towns in every sense of the word. Along with individuals seeking greater opportunities for themselves and their families were adventurers of all stripes looking for more immediate gratification. Some migrants settled permanently at the border, using the hopes and dreams of others moving through town to their advantage.

Those who decided to seek work in the United States, however, did not have to cut their ties with their homeland. Most men venturing north believed that their stay in the United States was temporary, and indeed many returned to their homes in Mexico. Lax enforcement of immigration restrictions at the border, the concentration of Mexican workers in seasonal employment, and the liberal policies of railroad companies toward transporting workers back and forth combined to make it easy for individuals to see United States employment as an extension of their work experience in Mexico. According to Immigration Service records, for example, one man crossed the border on a work permit for ten straight years, returning every winter to his family.[23]

This type of migration had a mushrooming effect, especially on villagers throughout northern and central Mexico. After the first few men went north to work, they returned with knowledge that made it easier for others to follow in their footsteps. Moreover, what began as a primarily border phenomenon was soon transformed into an option for peasants deep in the Mexican interior. By the time of the Mexican Revolution, most villages on the north central plateau had begun the process of circular migration to the north. With the violence of the civil war and the increasing labor needs of American employers during World War I, more villagers went directly to the United States for employment, bypassing Mexico's urban centers and the northern states altogether. Many ingenious methods were devised to facilitate this movement.

Getting to the border was often the first obstacle facing men seeking work in the United States. Laborers used a variety of means to pay for their trip north, reported to be 27 Mexican pesos in 1910 from Irapuato, the center of the agricultural and mining district of the west central plateau. Many saved for months to raise cash for the trip, or dipped into whatever savings were available. Others obtained funds for passage from their relatives, sometimes taking up a collection from each family member. A substantial group borrowed money. Inspector Stone told of a host of merchants in cities and towns in west central Mexico who loaned money at usurious rates to campesinos going north. Rarely was security furnished against these loans, as merchants relied for collateral on the borrower's honesty and the likelihood that he would return.[24]

One example of the way in which groups of men from the interior migrated together is found in the transcript of a Board of Special Inquiry held by the Supervising Inspector of Immigration in El Paso on May 13, 1910. Nine residents of Nochistlán and Llano Grande were stopped from crossing the border by officials who believed that they had been contracted for work. They were all headed for the Santa Fe & Topeka railroad to hire on as extra gang workers on the line from El Paso to Stafford, Kansas. A pass for one trip to Stafford had been sent by a foreman to a worker who had labored at the camp for sixteen months before he returned to Mexico to visit his family. Only two of the nine had worked at Stafford before, and these were the only men allowed to cross. Some had worked previously in Morenci, Arizona, Santa Ana, California, and Linden, Kansas, while others were coming north for the first time. Those who could not afford passage to the border borrowed money from their parents or from others in the group. Each had left either parents or a wife at home, and all expected to return to Mexico within the year. Though the news of a free pass had encouraged them to leave as a group, each admitted having a long-standing desire to come.[25]

Not often present in accounts of international migration is a description of the actual border crossing. The experiences of Mexican immigrants differed greatly from those of millions of other immigrants from Europe and elsewhere. Of course, what it means to cross our borders has changed over time, and thus immigrant experiences have also changed. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, crossing over from Mexico was transformed from a casual and easy task—with perhaps few questions asked by officials—to a tense and formal ritual full of suspicion.

Internal reports from the Immigration and Naturalization Service provide detailed accounts of procedures used for inspection at the El Paso border. In the early period, the primary concern of immigration officials was the entry of Chinese who evaded the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act by entering from Mexico. There was little attention paid to Mexicans. In late 1906, for example, an inspector crossed the border incognito to observe this process. "On the night of the 27th," he reported,

> [I] got on the car at Juárez. When the bridge was reached the Customs officers boarded the car, the Immigration officer following them. He looked around, asked a man ahead of me in Spanish "*¿De dónde viene usted?*" (Where do you come from). He asked me the same question and I answered, "*Yo soy Mexicano*" (I am a Mexican), and he passed on.[26]

Two days later, Inspector Seraphic crossed again, noticing how little attention was paid to the movement of Mexicans across the border. While the immigration official on duty at the Stanton Street Bridge sat in his office, hundreds of Mexicans passed back and forth without inspection. After nearly an hour of observation, Seraphic reported that the official had made no attempt to leave his seat and sat inside by the stove reading a newspaper. Mike Romo, a longtime El Paso resident, remembered a similar situation on the Santa Fe Bridge. ". . . One evening I was coming along about 6:00 or 7:00. There was a man [there]; he was the only one at the bridge, on a soap box. Evidently he was sleeping; he had his head down. Anyway, I guess he heard me walking. He lifted up [his head] and looked at me, and then down it [went] again. They didn't bother about anything!"[27]

Charles Armijo, who crossed the border in December 1910 as his family fled Villa's troops in central Chihuahua, explained that upon arriving in Juárez, "well, we just came over. There were no restrictions then about Mexicans coming over. They were free to come in and go out without any passport, without anything else. Everybody was allowed to go back and forth whenever they wanted. . . . And we came over on the streetcar." "All you had to do coming from México, if you were a Mexican citizen," recalled Cleofas Calleros, "was to report at the immigration office on the American side—give your name, the place of your birth, and where you were going to." Conrado Mendoza also remembered crossing during the Mexican Revolution: "All one had to do was get on the electric trolley, or on the electric streetcar, and cross over to the United States, and no one told you anything." The electric streetcar itself had only recently replaced mule-drawn trolleys in 1908 as the most used public transportation to get across the bridges spanning the Rio Grande. These mule-drawn vehicles had carried passengers across the El Paso Street and Stanton Street bridges since 1877.[28]

The laxity with which American officials patrolled the border crossing in 1910 was not due to an absence of immigration statutes on the books. Although no quotas were applied to Mexico until 1965, there were restrictions against border crossings by those deemed morally suspect, diseased, engaged in contract labor, and "likely to become a public charge." Any of these categories, particularly the "LPC" provision, could have barred most entrants from Mexico in this period. But the presence of a strong border culture in which passage had been largely unregulated—this area, after all, had been known as "the northern pass"—mitigated against stringent enforcement of these regulations. Instead, civil servants working at the border concentrated their efforts on the surreptious entry of the Chinese and patrolled against criminal activity. Thus the economic function of the border passage took firm root relatively unencumbered.

Both American officials and entering aliens understood that it was the labor needs of the American Southwest that defined Mexican migration to the United States and not laws drawn up in Washington. Making this point emphatically were representatives of labor recruitment agencies, who stood directly outside the buildings of the Immigration Service. These agencies, called *reenganches* by Mexicans, had operated out of El Paso since 1882, when the city was firmly connected to the large railroad network in the American Southwest. F. W. Berkshire, supervising inspec-

tor at El Paso, acknowledged the situation when he reported to his superior in Washington:

> We can exclude practically all of the Mexican aliens of the laboring class who apply for admission at this port as persons likely to become a public charge, for the reason that they are without funds, relatives or friends in the United States, and have no fixed destination; at the same time we know that any able-bodied man who may be admitted can immediately secure transportation to a point on the railroad where employment will be furnished him.[29]

Knowing that labor agencies immediately employed the immigrants, the Immigration Service established a policy of admitting all such aliens. As Berkshire put it, the Bureau had "to recognize the fact that this [El Paso] is a labor market and will unquestionably continue to be such." The importance of these labor agencies in distributing Mexican labor in the United States is confirmed by the fact that in 1910 some 43,548 alien Mexicans were shipped from El Paso alone to points throughout the Southwest and Midwest. This compares with a total Mexican-born population of 221,915 in the United States, according to the 1910 census—little more than five times the number shipped in one year! The law prohibiting those likely to become public charges, intended for immigrants from Europe and Asia who traveled long distances across oceans before being allowed to secure employment, was circumvented on the border to meet the demands of the labor market. Immigration officials remained acutely sensitive to the needs of American employers and condoned what they felt they could not prevent.[30]

The Immigration Service could hardly have been unaware of the implications of their actions. Outside their offices, labor "rustlers" conducted their business openly, to a point that Berkshire felt that the noise produced "when they begin to ply their wares" was "almost intolerable."[31] Another El Paso official described the transfer process in this fashion:

> As they [the aliens] applied and were admitted, they would be taken to the basement of the Immigration Service building and held until detailed individual examinations were completed. When a group could be released, guards would escort the men outside to the rear of the building and line them up. There agents representing the railroads and the ranches would make speeches about the delightful quarters, good pay and fine food they would have if they went to work for their company. When the promising was over, the agents would shout, "This way for the Santa Fe," "This way for the Southern Pacific," and so on, the men following the agent they thought offered the best or most benefits.[32]

Despite the compromised behavior of the Immigration Service, its relationship with the labor recruitment agencies remained problematic. While ignoring the "public charge" clause of the immigration laws, the Service did attempt to enforce provisions against contract labor. Labor agencies and employers were prohibited by law from soliticing for labor

on the Mexican side of the border. But reports consistently poured into immigration offices describing attempts by recruiters to gain advantage over competitors in El Paso by soliciting in Juárez or on trains bound for Juárez. Thus, aliens arriving in El Paso were often predisposed to signing up with one particular labor agency, since promises had already been made.

The special relationship between these labor agencies and the Immigration Service was exposed in a series of proposals advanced and executed by Supervisor Berkshire of El Paso from 1909 to 1913. In a letter to the Commissioner-General of Immigration on November 1, 1909, Berkshire suggested that all labor agencies be housed in one building under the control of a joint representative that would insure that no solicitation occurred in Mexico and that no illegal aliens be shipped out for railroad work. In defense of the plan, Berkshire argued that the proposal was a compromise, for he admitted agents could not be eliminated entirely. He acknowledged, however, that the idea was originally advanced by the three "reputable" labor firms, the Holmes Supply Company, L. H. Manning & Company, and the J. E. Hutt Construction (later the Hanlin Supply) Company, who sought only to perfect "some arrangement whereby they might secure, in a perfectly proper and legitimate manner, their proportionate share of the Mexican laborers admitted at this port."[33]

Although obstensibly put forward to preserve law and order, these proposals were tinged with behind-the-scenes machinations which revealed the favoritism and discriminatory attitudes of local immigration officials. Mexican laborers who crossed the border were much more likely to take up the offers of labor agencies run by Spanish-surnamed individuals, most of whom had been in operation for many years and who had built up a reputation with the returning migrants and their companions. Zarate & Avina, for example, was the largest labor agency in El Paso. It was so successful that the three Anglo-run agencies in town were constantly trying to buy the company out. Although Berkshire called the Mexican American agencies "unquestionably irresponsible," other evidence indicated that, to the contrary, it was the newer Anglo-run agencies which had established commissaries for their "recruits," charged exorbitant rates, and, in effect, served only to exploit further the Mexican workers. According to the Mexican Americans involved in labor recruitment, Berkshire moved in the same social circles as their Anglo American competitors, and often enjoyed New Mexican hunting and camping trips with company executives.[34]

Berkshire's own attitude toward the immigrant was generally paternalistic and founded on his conviction that "the Mexican peon is childlike and travels with a party from the same locality as himself." He felt that the immigrants' tendencies to trust only those agencies with Mexican names gave such companies an unfair advantage. Consequently he prohibited all agencies from using their own names when recruiting. Instead

they were allowed only to present themselves as representatives of specific railroad lines. It did not trouble him that the major railroad companies used Anglo-run firms almost exclusively.[35]

It was not long before Berkshire's superiors in Washington began to have reservations about the El Paso office's entangling alliances with labor agencies and southwestern employers. One investigator felt that Berkshire had "simply become a party to an agreement whereby those interested are permitted to secure, with his approval, a class of laborers against the admission of which the law is directly aimed"—the poor and destitute paupers. An assistant solicitor warned that "the proposed plan would practically have the effect of making the acceptance by these indigent peons of the offers of employment the test of their right to enter and remain in the United States."[36]

In late 1912, the Office of the Solicitor ruled that Berkshire's plan to develop an official relationship with the city's Anglo-run labor agencies was in violation of immigration law. Berkshire continued to push variations of the plan for several months, however. Finally, Berkshire admitted defeat and decided that, given this finding, little more could be done to strengthen enforcement of the contract labor law.[37] Though resigned to the lack of formal arrangements, border officials continued to maintain informal ties to labor recruiters and southwestern employers for many years to come. Given that the movement of Mexicans across the border was not primarily a legal question, but rather an economic one, it is not surprising that this relationship continued.

The unraveling of the Mexican Revolution, however, heightened the sense of tension along the border. Since Juárez and other border towns were often sites of intense revolutionary conflict, Americans were warned not to cross into Mexico, and normal border traffic was often disrupted. Immigration officials sometimes took out their frustrations with the situation on Mexicans wanting to cross into the United States. One resident of El Paso, Harry C. Carr, finally complained to his senator:

> I remember another night that an old Mexican woman came across the bridge. The custom house is located at one side of the road. She walked along the other side. One of the custom officials yelled for her to come back. When she stood before him, he yelled, "What have we got this house here for?" She said she didn't know. "Well, we'll learn you what it is here for," he said. She was finally allowed to go after having been brutally insulted before four or five admiring inspectors.[38]

Misunderstandings because of language were a frequent source of anxiety. Many American officials did not speak Spanish, and this ignorance only aggravated the situation, as evidenced by another account by Carr:

> On the morning of June 29, there was a street car strike and traffic was delayed. When a car finally did come over from Juárez it was crowded. In order to better examine the crowd, the officials found it necessary to have some of the people leave the car. This is the way they made the request: "Git out of here." The Mexicans did not know what he meant and hesitated. "Jesus Christ," he yelled at the top of his voice. "Can't you God Damn fools git out when I tell you to?" With that he reached into the crowd and began yanking them out as though they were bales of rags.[39]

Carr himself worried about the ramifications of such treatment. He thought that "it does not seem right for a great government like the United States to allow its petty officials to bully these humble peons and to inspire them with a hatred for us that will live for generations."[40] Though his complaints were investigated, officials at the border denied the allegations and no further action was taken.

At other times, however, the lack of Spanish-language ability among early immigration inspectors provided a ready-made resource for ridicule of Anglo-Americans by Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. One Tejano who worked for the Border Patrol as a translator from 1924 to 1930 recalled an incident involving an Anglo officer who believed he could speak Spanish well:

> He walked up to one fellow and asked:
> —¿Cómo se llama yo? (What is *my* name?)
> —Pues quién sabe, señor. (Well, who knows, sir.)
> And then he turned to me and said:
> —How stupid can these people be, they don't even know their own names.[41]

In 1917, the United States Congress passed an immigration act which, for the first time, placed substantive restrictions on European immigration and on those who entered from Mexico. These included a literacy test, a medical examination, a head tax, and the institution of an investigation procedure into the likelihood that the individual would become a public charge. Although an official exemption was extended to Mexicans until 1921, the Immigration Service formalized its procedure in El Paso, borrowing many of the techniques it used for European immigrants at coastal ports such as Ellis Island. These new requirements compelled the government to expand its personnel on the international bridge and construct additional facilities for the inspection of aliens. A report from the inspector in charge of the main crossing at El Paso described this new procedure:

> On arriving at the American side of the Santa Fe Street Bridge, aliens are first inspected and, if necessary, vaccinated by the Public Health Service. . . . The majority of the second class arrivals are also bathed and deloused and their clothing and baggage fumigated by that Service. This occurs in the Public Health building between the boundary and this office. After the delousing and fumigating process is completed the aliens are discharged into a courtyard or "patio" which is entirely surrounded by the buildings of this and the Public Health Service. Fumigating, delousing and vaccination is

commenced at about 7 or 8 a.m., dependent upon number of arrivals and other circumstances.[42]

Particular attention was paid to the medical condition of arriving aliens, since one of the earliest distinctions made between "desirable" and "undesirable" arrivals revolved around their health. From early in the history of the American Republic, immigrants were blamed for spreading contagious diseases throughout the land. Furthermore, the feeble or disabled were barred, since they could not contribute to the labor needs of the United States. The process by which this distinction was made clear to the new arrivals was direct. All newcomers were separated into a special room where they were carefully and systematically examined by medical practicioners hired by the Immigration Service.[43]

Another procedure borrowed directly from Ellis Island was the separation of "first class" passengers from the "laboring classes" by a rather subjective visual analysis. It was only the "second class" migrants (the concept of steerage passengers borrowed from ocean travel) who experienced the rather humiliating medical examination. Wealthier looking immigrants were usually quickly inspected without having to disembark the trains they were riding, and only those in obvious bad health were subject to closer scrutiny. If apparently healthly, immigrants were allowed to pass even when the medical examiner was not available. Moreover, the literacy test was not given to "members of the learned profession or high officials" to avoid embarrassing incidents. In December 1923, the number of immigrants arriving daily in this fashion from Mexico was estimated at usually 5 or 6, and rarely exceeded 10 or 12. Most were professionals, officials, and returning residents from El Paso.[44]

What Mexicans who crossed the border after 1917 at El Paso seemed to remember most vividly were the baths they were forced to endure each time they crossed. The implementation of the medical provisions of the 1917 Act coincided with an outbreak of an influenza epidemic in the border region, thereby solidifying the Anglo-American public's connection of immigration with disease. The baths were maintained at least through the 1920s and became one of the most humiliating aspects of the border crossing. Migrants would be forced to remove their clothes and bathe while their clothes were washed and dried. It was easy to distinguish people who had recently crossed the border because their clothes were often quite wrinkled from this process. As one migrant remembered, "they disinfected us as if we were some kind of animals that were bringing germs." Many tried to avoid the baths by taking special care to be clean and well-dressed in order to persuade officials to waive the requirement.[45]

The literacy test, implemented in 1917, required that all aliens over the age of sixteen admitted to the United States be able to read in at least one language. Besides six test cards provided by Washington, immigration officials in El Paso prepared twelve additional ones containing excerpts from the Proverbs, which were translated into Spanish.[46] This literacy test was one of the final examinations administered to arrivals at the border. Recounted one official,

> Each inspector is provided with two or more of the official Spanish language test cards or typewritten copies thereof on 3" x 5" cards, and no two aliens of the same family or group are tested by the same card. The cards are changed frequently. . . . Aliens sometimes represent that they have forgotten or are without spectacles or eyeglasses. For use in such cases printed in one-inch letters by the use of a rubber stamp, the reading matter copied from the official Spanish language test cards, are sometimes used in testing such Mexican aliens. . . . A record of the inspection is made on manifest (Form 548) and the alien required to sign it. This assists to some extent in detecting illiteracy.[47]

Upon completion of a successful literacy exam, the names of the individuals were compared with lists of aliens previously excluded or deported. Aliens claiming marriage were required to show proof, an obvious hardship to those having wed under common-law practices in Mexico. Individuals who could not produce such documentation went before a special board of inquiry that attempted to ascertain whether the "alleged relationship" indeed existed or whether the couple was "immoral" and should be rejected for "moral turpitude." Finally, head tax receipts were endorsed, and all aliens not required to appear before the board of special inquiry were discharged from the station.[48]

A head tax in the amount of $8 was imposed in 1917. In El Paso, the agent of the transportation company, usually the El Paso Electric Railway Company, collected the money. The 1924 Act added the payment of a $10 fee to secure a visa from the nearest American consul prior to departure. During the first full year of the 1917 Act, 5,745 Mexicans were turned away at the border for being "unwilling or unable to pay the head tax." After the 1924 Act was implemented, legal immigration dropped from 90,000 during 1924 to 32,378. The increased financial barriers to immigration encouraged workers to enter the country illegally, and the rise in illegal arrivals after the imposition of these restrictions probably matched, if not surpassed, the decline in legal immigration.[49]

The extensive complicity between employers and government officials which had developed since the late nineteenth century was further exposed by the 1917 Immigration Act. The type of labor available for Mexican men in the United States did not require literacy nor the possession of money at the border. Up to 1917, the majority of men turned away were debarred only for medical reasons, a fact which didn't trouble employers since their value as laborers was already questionable. On the other hand, women and children might often be barred because their value as railroad laborers was minimal. With the new provisions of the

1917 Act, border officials instituted "boards of special inquiry" to investigate the circumstances surrounding the immigration of children traveling to the United States without their parents and women traveling alone. Both of these situations, unlike those confronting adult men, were seen as circumstances which made a potential immigrant "likely to become a public charge." Thus, officials further gendered the border crossing, making the female "condition" grounds alone for suspicion.[50]

The coming of the 1917 Immigration Act, however, did complicate matters for male migrants because of the new expense. As early as 1913, however, officials realized that the restrictions would lead to increased violations of the law. And they were right. For the first time, significant numbers of aliens illegally crossed into the United States to avoid the head tax. The Immigration Service also realized early on that labor recruiters and southwestern employers cared very little how their prospective employees had made it to the United States.[51]

To prevent the indiscriminate hiring of undocumented workers at El Paso, the Immigration Service began to demand a head tax receipt from every alien at Union Depot. This procedure caused difficulties for some, but many simply boarded freight trains outside the city bound for inland areas of employment, particularly California, where enforcement of immigration laws in this period was almost nonexistent. According to two Labor Department investigators, train officials did not molest these riders, since "the railroad supply agents figure that upon their arrival in California, they will secure their percentage of track work and if they do not, the alien unskilled worker will secure employment in the many seasonal activities." These conditions led the chief inspector in El Paso to report that supervision of the border was so lax "that practically any alien desirous of entering the United States and possessed of ordinary intelligence and persistence could readily find the means of so doing without fear of detection."[52]

The new immigration laws were rarely conceived with the realities of the border in mind. In Washington, politicians focused primarily on restricting European immigration. Their lack of interest in the Southwest is demonstrated by the fact that the Border Patrol was not established until 1924. Before then, enforcement of the immigration laws was a shared function of the Customs and Labor departments and focused primarily on ports of entry established in border towns. Outside of these towns, there were few clear demarcations along the border, making surreptitious entry relatively easy. In addition, a limited number of civil service employees kept watch over smugglers' most traveled routes.[53] One report spelled out the difficulties:

> The inland borders of the United States are inadequately guarded, particularly the Mexican Border and unless one traverses the entire distance for more than 2,500 miles he has no conception of the vast stretches of unguarded territory and cannot realize the obstacles the immigration officers have to contend with. One travels from mountain to mountain, over valleys and across desert and plain, rocky bluffs, stretches of arid wastes, across rivers and irrigated lands. One meets with many conditions, favorable and adverse, with sections thickly populated and in others with but a few souls for hundreds of miles. . . .[54]

Only about 40 officers patrolled the area around El Paso, the largest region of legal and illegal entry.[55] From the beginning, the Border Patrol realized that it was almost completely unable to stem the rising tide of immigration from Mexico.

Early Border Patrol officers had a great deal of latitude in applying immigration statutes, because they received so little preparation for the work itself. One of the first officers hired along the Texas-Mexico border, Wesley Stiles, was frank about his lack of training. When asked whether he was sent to a school or was told what his authority was, he answered:

> —No. That was the thing about it. None of us spoke any Spanish to speak of and somebody suggested, we'd better get you a speaking dictionary (laughter). That's the best way to learn Spanish. But anyway, we didn't have any schooling. No one knew what to do. That was the big trouble.
>
> —And you didn't know what your authority was?
>
> —Just look for aliens. The little law book that they gave us was about that thick, it wasn't an inch.[56]

Another recruit who joined in 1925, Edwin M. Reeves, summed up his training like this: "Just give you a .45 single action revolver with a web belt—and that was it."[57]

The Border Patrol, however, was crucial in defining the Mexican as "the other," the "alien," in the region. J. C. Machuca, who worked for the El Paso Department of Immigration in the late 1920s, recalled that some of the early immigration inspectors were members of the Ku Klux Klan, which was a leading organization in the El Paso region at the time. Officials would consistently denigrate those who crossed at the bridge, even if their papers were perfectly legal. Eventually crossing the border became a painful and abrupt event permeated by an atmosphere of racism and control—an event that clearly demarcated one society from another.[58]

An unintended result of the new immigration laws and the tensions they produced was to make temporary immigrants already living in the United States think twice about returning to Mexico. Many on six-month work permits planned to go back to their homes and families through El Paso in the fall. Since the Literacy Act, the head tax, and the visa fee made a future reentry prohibitive, many stayed on. Avoiding the racism one could easily encounter at the border crossing might also have played a part in this decision. The new laws insured that onetime entry from Mexico, rather than the back-and-forth migration widespread before 1917, would be much more likely in the future. Consequently, when work in the fields or on the railroads proved temporary, an increasing number of Mexicans settled in the larger cities of the American Southwest.[59]

Even the return trip through El Paso-Juárez became more problematic as restrictions were tightened for passage. One El Paso resident remembered working as a teenager directing "norteños" (those who had ventured north of the border to work) to money exchange houses and hotels for several nights' stay on their way south. This sort of guidance was necessary because "many got robbed, others were sick, some got drunk, then got robbed." Unscrupulous residents of the border area took advantage of returning migrants, who were often exhausted and disoriented, and who tended to bring their wages with them in cash. A friendly, sympathetic guide became a necessity for maneuvering through El Paso-Juárez. Teenage boys were able to make a living from tips from the migrants and from owners of establishments catering to them, but this form of "protection" only added to the returnee's burden.[60]

As the Border Patrol became more of a presence and uncomplicated passage disappeared, some migrants who had originally crossed without proper documents sought to legalize their status in the United States. Jesús Pérez, who had crossed in 1923 without documents, decided in 1928 to formalize his status because the immigration service had stepped up its activities around his hometown of Fabens, Texas. "I gathered my coins and I came, arriving exactly on September 1, 1928 to the immigration station on the other side. Right away I took care of this business in seven days. On the 7th of September they gave me my passport to cross into the United States and until this day here I am, yes sir."[61]

For others, this process could turn out to be a humiliating ordeal. Catalina Aranda recalled assisting a friend who wanted to legalize his status. "He came here very young, but after many years he went to Mexico and then he returned. . . . And then he wanted to fix his passport, so I took him. And then the Americans there laughed at him, because they asked him when he had crossed." After much ridicule and confusion regarding his story, the immigration official continued:

> —Well, didn't anyone mark your passage when you crossed?
>
> —No, there wasn't anyone here.
>
> —Yes, this office is full of officials dressed in green uniforms.
>
> —Well yes, but they said nothing to me and I just crossed.

This gentleman was able to secure a valid passport only after engaging a lawyer.[62] Things had changed so rapidly along the border that many newcomers to immigration work, like this boastful American official, knew little about procedures that had only recently been discarded or modified.

Yet even after the establishment of the Border Patrol in 1924, the arbitrariness of enforcement continued throughout the 1920s. Even more important than the regularized procedure was the cultural dimension which clearly showed Mexicans who was in control of the border pass. Those Mexicans who had been long-term border residents could

continue to cross in a casual fashion if, and only if, they were granted this special privilege by some Anglo benefactor. Angel Oaxaca remembers carrying a special letter during the 1920s written by a prominent El Paso physician, a Dr. Gallagher, which allowed him to cross the border at any time, day or night.[63]

Another long-term resident who lived on the Mexican side of the border and had been crossing regularly since at least 1912 remembered an encounter he had with Chief Immigration Officer Pierce in 1926, after more strigent restrictions had been put in place. Epitacio Armendáriz recalled returning from a job in Santa Rita, New Mexico, with a local passport which prohibited working in the United States. Driving a shiny new truck that he had bought with his earnings, he encountered Pierce on the bridge, who asked him:

> —Where are you coming from?
>
> —Well, I went to do a little work in Santa Rita.
>
> —No, listen, you can't work with a local passport.
>
> —Oh yeah? Then what is a local passport for? For going around here locally.
>
> —No, it is to enter and leave [the border], for stays of a week or eight days, or ten days, or fifteen days, but does not allow you to get a job.
>
> —Oh, now I understand you.
>
> —It's okay. It doesn't matter, I'm not going to take your passport away. But don't cross again like that. If you do again, well, don't tell anyone about it, don't even tell me.[64]

Even when individual exceptions were made, the new immigration statutes and their administration on the border heightened the significance of the boundary line between Mexico and the United States. Indeed, the modern version of the border was created during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It became a much more rigid line of demarcation, as the intricate economic relationship between Mexican labor and American capital was perpetuated through the labor recruitment agents. Here immigration officials, through their inspection of new arrivals and the enforcement of laws barring illegal entry, made it clear that passage across this barrier in the desert was a momentous occasion, a break from the past. The new role of the immigration inspector was duly noted by an El Paso attorney when he wrote to Washington, D.C.: "His business has brought him in contact with the poor, the ignorant, the friendless and the foreigner, over whom he has practically almost limitless power."[65] It was this power over the dreams of the individual immigrant which became increasingly evident at the border crossing.

Ironically, it was in this period of transition that the term "alien" first began to be applied to the Mexican in the Southwest. Men born hundreds of miles away from the border region—in the American East or Midwest—were suddenly given the task of enforcing laws passed by a majority of legislators who had probably never seen the area. These laws

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.

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-