



A History of Chicanos/Mexicanos Along the U. S.-Mexico Border

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Introduction

The history of Chicanos/Mexicanos in the U. S.-Mexico borderlands is a central part of the Hispanic experience in the United States. As the area where two nations have defined their relationship at close range, and where different ways of life have clashed and blended with great intensity, the border region has shaped in fundamental ways the place of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in both Mexican and U. S. society. Key aspects of the history of these people such as ethnicity, migration, and labor are quintessential border themes, as are processes related to culture such as bilingualism and biculturalism. Apart from its historical significance, the border region continues to exert significant influence today.

This essay provides an overview of borderlands history, focusing on topics of major importance in the evolution of the region. Attention is directed in particular to those events or processes that manifest profound or rapid change, and to those periods that have altered transnational relationships in a significant manner. The story developed here begins in 1800, on the eve of the arrival of Anglo-Americans, and concludes with observations of contemporary conditions in the area.

The Mexican Northern Frontier, 1800-1821

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Nueva Viscaya (Chihuahua/Durango) constituted the most populous province in northern New Spain, with Upper California, Sonora/Sinaloa, Nuevo México, Nuevo León and Nuevo Santander (Tamaulipas) also having significant populations (Table 1). Santa Fe, New Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas, stood out as major urban centers north of the present boundary, while Monter-

rey, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, and Durango ranked as the most significant cities to the south. On the Río Grande, Paso del Norte, then a part of Southern New Mexico, occupied a prominent place as a gateway between central and far northern New Spain.

A climate of uncertainty prevailed on the frontier throughout the years of Spanish rule. Sonorenses, *nuevomexicanos*, and *tejanos* in particular endured acute privation in their daily lives due to local underdevelopment and isolation from the Mexican core. Living at the edge of New Spain, they had to fend for themselves, producing the goods they needed for survival and acquiring whatever other products they could through occasional trade with the outside world. Continuous attacks on towns, ranches and farms by Apaches and Comanches posed a major problem for the *norteños*. Many lost their lives fighting the Indians,

TABLE 1
Estimated Population
in New Spain's Northern Frontier, 1800

	Spaniards/ Mexicans	Indians	Total
Upper California	1,800	36,000	37,800
Lower California	1,400	5,000	6,400
Sonora/Sinaloa	70,000	55,000	125,000
Nuevo México	20,000	9,000	29,000
Nueva Viscaya (Chihuahua & Durango)	126,800	50,400	177,200
Texas	3,600	700	4,300
Coahuila	10,000	3,000	13,000
Nuevo León	35,000	3,000	38,000
Nuevo Santander (Tamaulipas)	33,000	3,000	36,000
Grand Totals	301,600	165,100	466,700

Source: Peter Gerhard, *The Northern Frontier of New Spain* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), 24.

Governor's Palace, Sante Fe, New Mexico.

while others suffered serious losses in stolen property. The norteño-Indian conflict of course had its roots in the invasion of Indian lands and in the Spanish effort to impose European "civilization" among the "backward" natives. A second danger stemmed from the threat of invasion by aggressive foreign powers such as England, France, Russia and the United States. All these countries had an acute interest in New Spain's northern frontier.

In the late eighteenth century, the Spaniards had responded to the insecurity and instability in El Norte by establishing a chain of *presidios* (garrisons) in strategic locations. In addition, they had implemented a policy of pacification among the Indians by making them dependent on Spanish trade and other forms of assistance. These initiatives resulted in an improved climate, but the vastness of the frontier made it impossible to extend protection to all areas.

Despite the unfavorable environment, the norteños managed to forge a dynamic society on the frontier. The economy of the region rested on mining, ranching, agriculture and regional trade. Sonora and Chihuahua became mining and ranching centers *par excellence*, while settlements in green areas such as south Texas and sections of California developed strong agrarian and ranching economies. Norteños prided themselves on their self-reliance and independent spirit, and on traditions and customs nurtured in the frontier surroundings.

The wars of independence that swept Mexico in the 1810s triggered important events in various northern

provinces. Texas witnessed destructive rebellions, Coahuila was the site of Miguel Hidalgo y Cortilla's arrest and Chihuahua was the site of his trial and execution. Other northern provinces, however, had almost no direct connection with the events that led to freedom from Spain. Thus, as a whole, El Norte played a peripheral role in the independence drama.

Nevertheless, the insurrection took a heavy toll in the region in the form of a damaged economy and reduced protection from the Indians. Texas suffered more than other areas, enduring some depopulation, trade disruption and food shortages, not to mention political instability and hundreds of deaths directly related to the insurrection.

The wars of independence and post-1821 political instability in central Mexico reinforced the isolation, self-reliance, and independent spirit of the norteños. National leaders faced the monumental task of building a nation from a ravaged economy and political disarray, and in that climate distant provinces suffered from neglect. Wishing to increase economic activity in their region, norteños began to trade with the Anglo-Americans who were coming into Texas, New Mexico and California after 1800. The information-gathering treks into Texas and New Mexico by Philip Nolan and Zebulon Montgomery Pike in 1799 and 1806, respectively, reflect early Anglo-American interest in El Norte.

Such incursions were later followed by Anglo colonization of Texas and the establishment of important trade routes into New Mexico and California. In Texas, Spain approved, and subsequently independent Mex-

ico endorsed, the entry of hundreds of Anglo families for the purpose of populating and developing that province. Subsequent events in Texas figure prominently in borderlands history and are detailed below. Neighboring New Mexico became the center of an important trade region linking Missouri and Chihuahua, with all points in the network connected by the famous Santa Fe Trail. In the case of California, Anglo traders and trappers penetrated beyond the Sierra Nevada, establishing contact with Spanish-Mexican settlements on the coast. Meanwhile, ports such as Monterey and San Francisco carried on brisk trade with Yankee clippers.

The Texas Rebellion and the War Against Mexico

The insurrection of Texas against the Mexican government in the 1830s is one of the most significant events in borderlands history, for it altered the boundary relationships, ushered in the U. S.-Mexico war and profoundly changed the destiny of *fronterizos* north of the Río Grande. Texas became an international battleground and an area of pronounced ethnic animosity. Such an environment made life extremely uncomfortable for Tejanos trapped in the dilemma of having to choose between allegiance to their *patria chica* and political loyalty to the motherland. For Tejanos of the border region, the end result would be especially tragic because they would suffer most from the resultant change in political jurisdiction and the racism of the Anglo majority.

In hindsight, it is easy to criticize Spain and Mexico for opening the eastern border in Texas to Anglo Americans. But in the 1820s, foreign colonization of sparsely populated and weakly protected territories made good sense. Spain and Mexico had both tried to induce more people from the Mexican heartland to move to Texas, but the effort yielded unimpressive results because Mexico had relatively few people with a need to migrate and because prospective colonists well understood the remoteness and dangers of the north. In their view, there was no reason to go so far and risk so much to make a new start in life. Migrants could move to attractive areas within the heartland itself.

In any case, the Spanish government in 1821 allowed former Spanish subject Moses Austin to settle 300 Anglo families in Texas. But within a short time he died of tuberculosis and his son, Stephen Austin, took over the enterprise, founding a colony on a large tract of land between the Brazos and the Colorado Rivers. With the change in government following Mex-

ican independence, young Austin confirmed title to the land during a visit to Mexico City. Evidence indicates that the Austin colonists were generally law-abiding people who felt grateful for the generous land grants they had received.

Anglo colonists brought in by other *empresarios*, however, created considerable problems for the Mexican government and for the Tejanos. Unlike Austin, some of the later *empresarios* failed to choose settlers carefully, allowing many ruffians, drifters and criminals to be part of the colonies. It appears that most of these undesirable elements arrived after 1830. They displayed feelings of racial superiority, denigrated the Mexican political and judicial systems and ignored laws that did not suit them, especially statutes pertaining to religion, slavery, foreign trade and immigration. In addition, the Texans, including many Tejanos, sought greater political representation. When the conservatives in the heartland imposed a centralist system, Texans vigorously protested their reduced autonomy.

The problems between Texans and Mexico City set off a chain of events that culminated in the famous independence movement of 1836. Among the battles fought between the rebel forces and the Mexican troops, the siege at the Alamo stands out in historical importance because it united the Texans, especially the Anglos, against Mexico and accelerated the declaration of independence. From the perspective of the insurrectionists, the Alamo also had powerful symbolic importance as an event that demonstrated local determination to sacrifice lives if necessary in the quest for "liberty and justice." From the perspective of Mexico, however, the carnage at the Alamo could have been avoided had the stubborn defenders been willing to surrender. Further, since the vast majority of those defenders were foreigners who had unlawfully taken up arms against the Mexican nation, they were in effect filibusters and therefore subject to quick execution.

The Texas-Mexico rift grew deeper and, following the defeat and capture of General Antonio López de Santa Anna by the Texans in April, 1836, the independence of Texas became a reality. Mexico, however, refused to recognize Texas autonomy and a *de facto* state of war existed into the 1840s.

For many Tejanos, the Texas-Mexico conflict created a no-win situation. Choosing one side meant arousing the ire of the other. Neutrality was not practical because strong suspicions prevailed among both Texans and Mexicans that non-alliance really meant solidarity with the enemy. Thus, many who professed neutrality suffered attacks from both sides. The best option for those who wanted to stay out of the fray was to flee into Mexico, away from the theater of battle. Yet in so doing they risked losing their homes and

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The Alamo.

farms because Texans viewed flight as evidence of “treason,” and that constituted justification for loss of property under Texas rule.

The Texas revolutionary fervor also unleashed strong racist sentiments against Tejanos, resulting in their designation and treatment as second-class citizens. Those who lived in the vicinity of the border, in particular, felt the brutality of the Anglo system, given that Texas nationalism manifested itself most strongly at the frontier where recurring frictions with Mexico spawned considerable tension.

The U. S. annexation of Texas in 1845 stands as one of the major manifestations of U. S. expansionism at the expense of Mexico. That act precipitated deep anger among Mexicans because a portion of the national domain had been absorbed by the aggressive Americans. A rupture in diplomatic relations followed and, after a tense period, war broke out over a skirmish in disputed territory adjacent to the Río Grande. Claiming that U. S. blood had been shed “on American soil,” President James Polk pushed a declaration of war through the Congress despite opposition from Abraham Lincoln and other critics of expansionism.

Lasting from April, 1846, to February, 1848, the war culminated a long process of conflict over territory between Mexico and the United States as well as their parent nations, Spain and England. By the mid-nineteenth century, a powerful United States saw as inevitable the absorption of Mexico’s northern provinces. When Mexico refused to sell the desired territories, the alternative became to take them by force. “Manifest Destiny” demanded that the weak neighbor yield to the demands of the stronger one, which sought to extend democracy and “civilization” to the people in the territories in question.

Invasion of the borderlands followed, with U. S. troops penetrating into Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, Nuevo México, Chihuahua and California. Cessation of hostilities ensued after the U. S. attack on Veracruz and march on Mexico City, where the Americans forced the Mexicans to sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded the northern territories (counting Texas) to the United States in exchange for peace and payment of \$18 million dollars to Mexico. Thereafter the Río Grande and a somewhat jagged line from just above El Paso to the Pacific con-

stituted the new border. In 1854, Mexico ceded southern Arizona and southern New Mexico to the United States as part of the Gadsden Treaty, and the border changed again.

Thus Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and parts of Wyoming, Kansas and Oklahoma became U. S. territories as a result of the events of the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, leaving Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Sonora and Baja California as the new El Norte within the Mexican nation. A different configuration had been imposed on the borderlands, one with far-reaching implications.

At the personal level, the war took a heavy toll on the people of the region. Each of the areas invaded witnessed battles, occupation by foreigners, death, injury, property loss and sundry discomforts and dislocations that accompany all wars. Local resistance movements were crushed by the better equipped and better trained U. S. forces. In short, the war had a devastating effect on *fronterizos*, but the new system under which they would have to live after 1848 had distressing consequences as well.

Colonialism, 1848-1900

For those Mexicans residing north of the new boundary who desired to continue living in Mexican territory the only alternative became to move southward. Thus, approximately 3,000 Tejanos and Nuevomexicanos migrated to points in Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, retaining their allegiance to the motherland. Others unable or unwilling to move remained in their homes, placing their futures in the hands of the U. S. government and those Americans who migrated into the Southwest. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed citizenship, property, and religious rights to the Mexican population absorbed into the United States, but violations of such assurances became commonplace. Untold numbers lost their land, suffered discrimination, or ran afoul of an oppressive police apparatus.

In effect, the Chicanos of the Southwest became a colonized group, having undergone foreign conquest and marginalization within the American system. The degree of colonization varied from place to place and among different social classes, but functionally all Mexicans felt its sting. The Chicano elite quickly lost economic and political power to Anglo capitalists and politicians. Texas and California, where masses of unsympathetic Anglo voters shaped the new order, are good examples of this trend. Only in New Mexico, where Hispanos remained in the majority, could local leaders retain some significant control. At the lower

end of society, poor Chicanos endured lower wages than their Anglo counterparts, substandard working conditions and few opportunities for upward advancement. Segregation, poverty, poor education and discrimination relegated ordinary Chicanos, who constituted the preponderance of the Mexican-origin population, to underclass status.

Oppression perhaps ran deepest along the border, where recurring international incidents spawned exaggerated nationalism and nativism among Anglos. Examples of violent confrontations in the U. S. borderlands abound, and three will suffice to illustrate the highly charged environment in which border Mexican Americans lived, especially along the Texas-Mexico frontier. The first example is the "Cart War" of 1857, during which jealous Anglo businessmen attacked Mexican teamsters who dominated trade from San Antonio to the Texas coast. Seventy-five people died in these assaults. A second instance of conflict is the 1859-1860 raid led by Juan Nepomucena Cortina on Anglo-controlled settlements in the Texas Lower Río Grande Valley. Cortina's attacks stemmed from abuses perpetrated on Mexican Americans by Anglos. Twenty-three persons died in these disturbances. Third, in the El Paso area in 1877, Mexican Americans joined with Mexican nationals in a rebellion against obnoxious Anglo politicians and unprincipled profiteers intent on taking over communal salt mines. Several clashes produced numerous deaths, destruction of property and tense international relations. Many Mexican Americans accused of perpetrating violence found refuge on the Mexican side. Among historians, this incident is popularly known as the El Paso "Salt War."

On the Mexican side of the border, *fronterizos* continued to endure traditional isolation and privation, but the post-1848 years brought new complications. The new boundary encouraged depredations on the part of U. S. Indians, who could now raid Mexican settlements and evade capture by quickly returning to U. S. soil. Article 11 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo obligated the United States to prevent such incursions, but either lack of will or resources prevented official compliance and the problem persisted. Things became worse after 1854 when the United States capitalized on Mexico's weakness and instability to absolve itself from that obligation when the Gadsden Treaty was ratified. In the decades that followed, transborder Indian raiding seriously disrupted life on the Mexican frontier. Unlawful invasions of Mexican territory by French and American adventurers also took a heavy toll, especially in the 1850s, the "golden age" of "filibustering." The people of Baja California and Sonora, in particular, endured attacks and occupation by foreigners intent on building personal fortunes or establishing indepen-

dent “republics.” Furthermore, lawlessness perpetrated by bandits, smugglers and other shady characters kept the Mexican frontier in constant turmoil. By the 1870s, border relations had deteriorated to the point of imminent war with the United States, but eventually diplomacy prevailed and conditions improved as the nineteenth century ended.

Colonialism also manifested itself in the economic domination imposed by the United States throughout northern Mexico, especially at the border. One immediate effect of the establishment of the new boundary in 1848 was to convert Mexican frontier settlements into satellites of the U. S. economy. The competition provided by Anglo merchants who moved into the region devastated many Mexican business people who had no access to capital or manufactured goods, both of which were more readily available to their counterparts across the line. For ordinary *fronterizos*, the major effect of the new border was a higher cost of living, for now tariffs had to be paid on “foreign” commodities. As a result of economic dislocation, scores of Mexicans migrated into the United States, where more favorable conditions prevailed.

The Mexican government provided some relief to the border communities by allowing a *Zona Libre*, Free Zone, to function in certain areas beginning in the late 1850s. Under the *Zona Libre*, border residents could import foreign products without having to pay the normal duties. That helped to stimulate the economy of the border towns, but the external dependence increased. In 1885, the Porfirio Díaz regime recognized the unique conditions at the frontier and extended the Free Zone the length of the border. Local trade flourished, ushering in new prosperity unseen in previous eras. Yet dependence on the U. S. economy grew deeper because the commercial stimulus was being driven from abroad. Then in 1905, following protests from U. S. merchants hurt by the diversion of commerce to the Mexican side, and pressures from Mexican businesspeople and industrialists from the interior who resented the preferential treatment given borderlanders, the Mexican government eliminated the Free Zone. Once again the border communities saw their economic fortunes change for the worse.

Meanwhile U. S. capitalists penetrated the economies of the northern states, in particular Chihuahua and Sonora. By the 1880s, American companies had built railroads along important routes that connected central Mexico with El Norte and with the United States. As the railroads reached rich mining districts and productive agricultural and ranching areas, they came to symbolize U. S. dominance, for they facilitated the export of precious metals and raw materials to the United States. The railroads also transported

Mexican workers to U. S.-run work sites throughout the borderlands.

As owners of Mexican mines, oil fields, farms, ranches and sundry industries, Americans exerted disproportionate influence in Mexico, engendering resentment among Mexicans. That resentment would play a pivotal role in the unrest that gripped Mexico in the early years of the twentieth century, an unrest that assumed nation-wide proportions by 1910, eventually exploding into revolution.

The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920

After almost four decades of living under a dictatorship, the people of Mexico launched an insurrection in the decade of 1910 that would become one of the major revolutions in the history of Latin America. Borderlanders felt firsthand the effects of that civil war, for their region held great importance for both *federales* and *revolucionarios*.

Northern Mexico and the U. S. Southwest witnessed considerable revolutionary activity even before the official start of the insurgency on November 20, 1910. For example, a labor strike in Cananea, Sonora, in 1906 assumed national importance because of the collusion between Mexican government officials and foreigners in suppressing it. Workers directed their demands at copper magnate William Greene, who owned the Cananea mine. Greene became one of the great symbols of foreign domination in Mexico, inspiring nationalism in El Norte and elsewhere. On the U. S. side, the self-exiled Flores Magón brothers agitated for radical change in their homeland by publishing an anti-Díaz newspaper, raising funds, and recruiting volunteers for their rag-tag army. Staying a step ahead of Díaz’s agents, the brothers carried on their activities in San Antonio, El Paso, St. Louis, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Once the Revolution began, prominent *insurrectos*, including Francisco Madero, the first elected president after the downfall of Díaz, crossed into the United States to plan their campaigns. Others, like Victoriano Huerta, found political asylum north of the border following their fall from grace in Mexico.

Much of the leadership of the revolution hailed from northern Mexico, including Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón, Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Pascual Orozco. These and other *norteños* contributed immeasurably to the mobilization of the masses, the fighting and the ideology of the movement. Madero, Carranza and Obregón served as presidents, thus directly helping to shape the new nation that emerged after 1910.

Many important battles were fought in El Norte, and especially along the border (Table 2). For example, in

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Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in 1922.

1911, the revolutionaries led by Madero defeated the federales in Ciudad Juárez in the first major battle of the revolution. Consequently, Díaz resigned the presidency, opening the way for the election of Madero that same year. Another major border battle occurred in 1915 when Carrancista forces repelled an attack on Agua Prieta by Villistas, initiating a rapid downward spiral for Villa from which he never recovered. Villa's decline is reflected in his surprise attack on the U. S. border hamlet of Columbus, New Mexico, the following year. Desperation as well as anti-American feelings surely played important parts in the Columbus attack.

From the perspective of Mexican-American borderlanders, one of the most significant events of the period is the raiding that took place in the Lower Río Grande Valley of Texas during 1915-1916. The raids involved Mexican nationals and Chicanos who followed the ideology proclaimed in the Plan de San Diego, a revolutionary document that called for an uprising in the U. S. Southwest, the creation of an independent state that might later be annexed to Mexico, and the liberation of African Americans and Native Americans from Anglo domination. It appears that Venustiano Carranza, the leader of the Mexican Constitutional forces, used the raids to pressure the Woodrow Wilson administration to extend recognition to his fledgling government, and thus Carranza is suspected of playing some role in the formulation and implementation of the Plan. Some historians link the Plan to other personalities and events in Mexico, also

minimizing the idea that it represented a genuine Chicano rebellion within the United States.

Regardless of the origin of the Plan, however, there is no question that many border Tejanos who had grievances against the Anglo power structure capitalized on the raids to make their discontent felt. To be sure, the raiders also included common bandits, motivated by the possibility of deriving personal gain. Tragically the raids engendered brutal repression in the Mexican-American community by Texas Rangers, sheriffs and vigilantes. Hundreds died, mostly poor Chicanos caught in the crossfire, and many people fled their homes. Perhaps the most positive result of the raids was the attention that was focused on problems in the Chicano border community, especially the conflict with abusive lawmen. An investigation exposed widespread unprofessional behavior on the part of the Texas Rangers, and their power was curtailed shortly thereafter.

TABLE 2
Revolutionary Instability Along the Border
1910-1920

Year	Place	Type of Activity
1910	Piedras Negras	Madero officially launches Revolution
1911	Agua Prieta	Maderistas capture Agua Prieta
	Ciudad Juárez	Following major battle, Maderistas force downfall of Díaz government
	Mexicali and Tijuana	Magonistas invade Baja California but are eventually repelled by federales
1912	Ciudad Juárez	Orozquistas drive out Maderistas
1913	Reynosa and Naco	Carrancistas rout Huertistas
1914	Ojinaga	Town falls to Villistas
	Nuevo Laredo	Hueristas inflict heavy damage on town
	Matamoros	Carrancistas capture the town
	Naco	Battle is fought between Villistas and Carrancistas
	Nuevo Laredo	Carrancistas and Huertistas fight two-day battle
1915	Matamoros	Villistas attack Carrancistas
	Agua Prieta	Carrancistas inflict decisive defeat on Villistas
	South Texas	Mexican nationals and Chicanos launch raids associated with insurrectionist Plan de San Diego
1916	South Texas	Plan de San Diego raids continue
	Columbus, NM	Villistas launch surprise attack; U. S. sends punitive expedition into Mexico
1917	Ojinaga	Town is captured twice by Villistas
1918	Nogales	Misunderstanding provokes battle between Mexicans and U. S. soldiers
1919	Ciudad Juárez	U. S. troops assist Carrancistas in repelling Villa attack

Source: Oscar J. Martínez, *Fragments of the Mexican Revolution* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1983).

Mexican border cities loomed large in the revolutionary drama primarily because whoever had control over them controlled customs revenues and the importation of arms, munitions, and supplies from the United States. Thus *fronterizos* had direct contact and involvement with many revolutionary events as well as personalities. Villa, for example, spent a considerable amount of time in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, and for decades after the revolution local residents recounted his exploits. Some spoke fondly of his military genius, leadership ability and concern for the poor, but others emphasized his cruelty, abusiveness and hatred for the well-to-do, especially foreigners. Thus Villa figures prominently in historical folklore on both sides of the border.

As in other parts of Mexico, people in the north endured displacement from their homes because of the fighting and the economic devastation wrought by prolonged instability. Hundreds of thousands made their way across the border during this decade, with many of them settling in cities like Laredo, San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson and San Diego. Most of the migrants were working-class people who sought economic opportunity in the United States, but a significant number came from the ranks of the middle and upper classes. In many instances the affluent fled political persecution, as in the case of the Chihuahua-based Terrazas family, many of whose members settled in El Paso when Villa rose to power.

Mexican workers who entered the United States during this period made significant contributions to

economic growth in the Southwest, especially in sectors like agriculture, mining, ranching and urban industries. Without their presence, cities such as El Paso would have grown much more slowly. Immigrants from the middle and elite segments of Mexican society also contributed to expansion of economic activity in the U. S. border region, for they bought properties, established businesses and spent money on consumer goods. Significantly, they and their descendants also provided additional resources and leadership in the Mexican-American community, which at that time suffered from acute underdevelopment owing to decades of neglect and racism at the hands of the dominant society.

Mexicans could cross the border with relative ease because few immigration restrictions existed, at least until the World War I period. U. S. employers often competed for their services through employment agencies or *enganchadores* (contractors) who sought to sign up workers as soon as they entered the United States. Some companies even sent recruitment agents into Mexico as a way of beating the competition.

In 1917, conditions changed drastically with the passage of a restrictive U. S. immigration law. Henceforth, immigrants would be required to pay a head tax, demonstrate their ability to read and, in the case of those under contract with employers, limit their stay in the United States to six months. The 1917 law, coupled with a fear felt by many immigrants that they might be drafted into the U. S. military, resulted in a

Mexicans working on the Pacific Electric Railroad, which by 1900 was the world's largest suburban transportation system. (Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.)

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Mexican workers bailing hay in the San Gabriel Valley in the 1890s. (Courtesy of the Seaver Center for Western History, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.)

sudden downturn in immigration. With the United States involved in World War I, the shortage of workers created by these developments led to an emergency, and the government quickly suspended the restrictive provisions of the law and assured Mexican nationals that they would not be drafted. The policy reversal had the desired effect and the migration flow returned to normal. Immigration officials renewed the suspension of the restrictions several times in the next four years, bowing to pressures from employers who argued that serious labor shortages would recur otherwise. To give structure and order to the flow of workers, the government established rules pertaining to wages, working conditions, and length of stay in the United States. In effect, the guest worker program at the end of the decade served as a precursor to the Bracero Program of the post-World War II era.

Borderlands in Transition

After the Mexican Revolution, a less confrontational climate settled over the borderlands. Sovereignty violations and large-scale international violence became a thing of the past, leading to a decrease in nationalistic sentiments on both sides of the border. Mexico began the process of political, economic and social reconstruction, slowly eliminating the conditions that had previously precipitated internal civil wars. Meanwhile, modernization and sustained economic growth became strongly institutionalized north of the boundary,

necessitating a closer relationship with northern Mexico, which, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, had in effect functioned as an extension of the Southwestern economy. These developments shaped the borderlands in ways that differed considerably from earlier periods when isolation, underdevelopment, and instability were the order of the day.

Population Growth and Migration, 1920-1940

As seen in Table 3, the population of the Mexican border states grew from 1.8 million in 1920 to 2.7 million two decades later, while that of the U. S. border states increased from 8.8 million to 14.4 million. Thus, by 1940, the combined population of the border states surpassed 17 million. People of Mexican origin comprised 22 percent of the population in the combined U. S. border states, with New Mexico standing out as the state with the highest percentage (41.7), followed by Arizona (20.4), Texas (12.0) and California (6.0). At the border, San Diego-Tijuana emerged as the most important binational community, boasting a combined population of about 220,000 by 1940, followed by El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, with almost 146,000 (Table 4). With the exception of San Diego, Mexican Americans comprised the majority of the population in each of the U. S. border cities.

Economic expansion throughout the borderlands precipitated the increases in the population. On the

TABLE 3
Population of Mexican and U. S. Border States
1920-1940

	1920	1940	
	Total	Total	% Mexican Origin*
Mexican Border States			
Tamaulipas	287,000	459,000	Near Total
Nuevo León	336,000	541,000	Near Total
Coahuila	393,000	551,000	Near Total
Chihuahua	402,000	624,000	Near Total
Sonora	275,000	364,000	Near Total
Baja California	63,000	130,000	Near Total
Totals	1,756,000	2,669,000	Near Total
U. S. Border States			
Texas	4,663,000	6,415,000	12.0
New Mexico	360,000	532,000	41.7
Arizona	334,000	499,000	20.4
California	3,427,000	6,907,000	6.0
Totals	8,784,000	14,353,000	22.0
Combined Totals	10,540,000	17,022,000	

*Persons who declared Spanish to be their "mother tongue."

Sources: *Censos Generales de Población* (México: Dirección General de Estadística), 1920-1940; *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*. (New York: Basic Books, 1976); unpublished data in author's files.

U. S. side, traditional sectors such as agriculture and mining continued to be important, but new industries such as oil production and tourism created new opportunities and drew capital and new residents to the region.

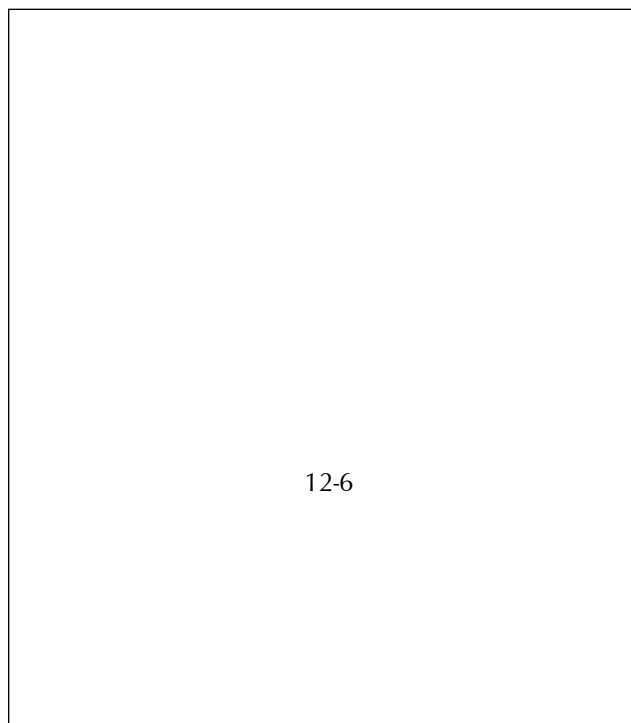
By the 1920s, large numbers of Mexicans, many of them recent immigrants, had settled in countless U. S. communities where employment could be found, whether in agriculture, mining, the railroads, factories, or in service occupations. Their willingness to work long hours for low pay made them ideal workers in the eyes of employers, but other sectors of U. S. society felt differently. Restrictionists objected to the presence of "too many" Mexicans and sought to convince the government to curtail their entry. Thus ensued the first major U. S. debate on Mexican immigration.

Proponents of Mexican immigration, including employers, religious leaders, and U. S. State Department officials, based their arguments on economic necessity, humanitarian considerations, and the need to maintain good diplomatic relations with Mexico. Opponents, comprised primarily of labor unions and nativist elements, argued that Mexicans hurt American workers and "damaged" U. S. society because of their "backwardness" and "inferior" intellectual capacity. Fortu-

nately for Mexicans, the pro-immigration forces prevailed, and the quotas imposed by the national-origins legislation of 1921 and 1924 excluded Mexico and other Latin American nations. Consequently, migration across the border continued at a high level, even surpassing the records set in the decade of 1910.

With the onset of the Great Depression, however, a reversal of these trends set in. Massive unemployment created strong pressures to "rid" the United States of "foreign" workers, with Mexicans being targeted as a primary group for deportation and "repatriation." Thus, in the 1930s, approximately 500,000 Mexicans, many of them U. S. citizens, left the United States both as "voluntary" and "involuntary" repatriates.

For the border communities, the "repatriates" presented special challenges. Many people would become stranded in cities like Ciudad Juárez, needing assistance from local government agencies and charitable organizations. Desperate migrants often resorted to begging and even crime in their efforts to survive, taxing the ability of the community to maintain order. Those migrants who sought to cross illegally into the United States, despite the unfavorable conditions of the period, faced the prospect of apprehension by the border patrol, possible assault by thieves and rapists



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Mexican women working at a commercial tortilla factory in the 1930s. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

who roamed the crossing spots, or deceit and fraud by coyotes (smugglers of undocumented people).

Despite good intentions, the Mexican government could not deliver on many promises made to the repatriates regarding jobs and free land in Mexico. Commonly few of them found satisfactory employment, and those who sought a new start in agricultural colonies encountered innumerable obstacles, including unfertile land, lack of water and no capital. From the perspective of the repatriates who endured severe hardships arising from unsuccessful resettlement, the best alternative became to seek reentry into the United States. Hence, by the late 1930s, thousands streamed northward once again, many with sad memories of their stay in Mexico. A report written by a Catholic social agency described the plight of one family which had failed to reestablish contact with relatives in Mexico and was forced to make its way back to the border. Of the seven members of the family, all but the father had been born in the United States.

Reaching [the interior of Mexico] after an absence of 30 years [the father] learned that [his] relatives had either died or moved away. The entire family started on foot back to the border. The father died at Torreón and the others continued to go on. In Chihuahua the youngest girl [age 4] died and the next day a

TABLE 4
Population of Select Twin Cities Along the Border
1920-1940

	1920	1930	1940
Matamoros	9,215	9,733	15,699
Brownsville	11,791	22,021	22,083
Reynosa	2,107	4,840	9,412
McAllen	5,331	9,074	11,877
Nuevo Laredo	14,998	21,636	28,872
Laredo	22,710	32,618	39,274
Piedras Negras	6,941	15,878	15,663
Eagle Pass	5,765	5,059	6,459
Ciudad Juárez	19,457	39,669	48,881
El Paso	77,560	102,421	96,810
Nogales, Son.	13,445	14,061	13,866
Nogales, Ariz.	5,199	6,006	5,135
Mexicali	6,782	14,842	18,775
Calexico	6,223	6,299	5,415
Tijuana	1,028	8,384	16,486
San Diego	74,361	147,995	203,341

Sources: *Censos Generales de Población* (México: Dirección General de Estadística), 1920-1940; *Censuses of Population* (U. S. Bureau of Census), 1900-1940. From Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1978), Appendix Table 4.

12-7

Waiting in line at the relief office during the Depression. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

baby boy was born. After three weeks the journey was resumed. They finally reached El Paso, where four days later the mother died. A neighbor had heard of our office and brought the four American-born children, the oldest of whom was 12, and we placed them in an orphanage. We later placed the baby with a good family in Juárez.

Prohibition and Its Aftermath

In 1920, the Volstead Act made it illegal to produce or consume liquor in the United States. Thus the Mexican border cities became poles of attraction for manufacturers of liquor and operators of bars, nightclubs, casinos and other establishments that sold alcohol. Many U. S. entrepreneurs joined Mexican businesspeople in catering to the demands of a large American clientele eager for beverages and entertainment not readily available in the United States. Consequently, cities like Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana acquired reputations as "world-class" centers of vice and moral degra-

dition. Fronterizos, while benefitting from the economic bonanza engendered by Prohibition, found themselves on the defensive, having to explain to their countrymen and foreigners why they tolerated such activities as drinking, gambling and prostitution.

In essence, limited economic options prompted fronterizos to capitalize on opportunities in the entertainment industry to maintain the viability of their communities. Since the elimination of the Free Zone in 1905 and the disruptions caused by the Revolution, the Mexican border zone had languished. Fronterizos had petitioned Mexico City for reinstatement of free trade, but to no avail. Thus, lacking strong commerce and industry, and with their agriculture beset by chronic shortages of water and capital, fronterizos turned to tourism.

Traditional attractions such as old missions, marketplaces, shops and “quaint scenery” drew a fair number of tourists, but most visitors headed for the entertainment centers. Responding to the demand, Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana greatly expanded their tourist districts, offering nightclubs and gambling centers, including first-class casinos, to foreign and local clientele alike.

In 1920, the Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals of the Methodist Church condemned the immoral climate that prevailed in Tijuana, claiming that “everything” went on in the tourist sector. “There are scores of gambling devices, long drinking bars, dance halls, hop joints, cribs for prostitutes, booze setters, gamblers, and other American vermin,” stated the board (Price 53). The following year, an American official characterized Ciudad Juárez as “the most immoral, degenerate, and utterly wicked place I have ever seen or heard of in my travels. . . . It is a mecca for criminals and degenerates from both sides of the border” (Aikman 17).

While “nocturnal” tourism damaged the reputation of the Mexican frontier, it also provided badly needed employment opportunities. Ordinary workers got jobs as waiters, bartenders, croupiers and taxi drivers. Entrepreneurs were able to open new establishments or expand existing ones, and professionals such as lawyers and government bureaucrats provided a wider array of services. The municipalities collected more fees and taxes, thus accruing added revenues to undertake public improvements.

U. S. border communities also benefitted from the boom in tourism on the Mexican side, attracting conventioners and miscellaneous visitors from throughout the United States. Conventions were typically held on the U. S. side in modern hotels, but following the work sessions conventioners headed across the border to “unwind” and “relax.” El Pasoans understood well the

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Fingerprinting a Mexican worker before deporting him. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

advantage of having Juárez as its neighbor, publicizing widely the “favorable” conditions at the border for “fun-loving” visitors. Thus, working together, the two cities hosted numerous American conventions, including the meetings of the American National Livestock Association, the National Postal Clerks, and the American Federation of Labor, all held in 1924.

For ordinary Mexican Americans, the diversions *al otro lado* provided relief from the drudgery of life in the United States. Most Chicanos worked long hours in low-paying jobs under substandard working conditions, and poverty, discrimination and segregation pervaded their lives. Thus, periodic escapes to the night spots in Mexico served to release accumulated pressures.

Prohibition came to an end in 1933 when the U. S. government realized the futility of legislating moral behavior and once again allowed Americans to legally manufacture and consume alcoholic beverages. That change in the law, coupled with the effects of the Depression, devastated the economies of the Mexican border cities. Thousands of people were thrown out of work, and many headed for the Mexican interior hop-

ing for more favorable conditions. Others attempted to emigrate to the United States, but severe unemployment and an anti-Mexican climate on the U. S. side made that option difficult and impractical. At that time the direction of the migratory flow was from north to south, and thousands of impoverished repatriados from the United States descended upon the Mexican border towns seeking assistance, thus adding to the local woes.

In the post-Prohibition years, then, the Mexican frontier faced a deeper crisis than other areas affected by the Depression. Fronterizos not only had to cope with a shattered economy, they also had to take care of large numbers of people expelled or pressured to leave the United States for economic reasons. The 1930s would rank among the most difficult years in the history of the region.

The Modern Borderlands

Since 1940, the border region has undergone profound change. On the U. S. side, World War II prompted the federal government to invest enormous amounts of capital throughout the Southwest in military installations, defense-related industries and infrastructure projects. The infusion of these external funds stimulated the entire economy, helping to convert the U. S. border region into one of the most dynamic areas in the country. As an extension of the U. S. Southwest, northern Mexico benefitted considerably from these trends, as well as from the industrialization policies promoted from Mexico City during the same period. By the late twentieth century, El Norte would emerge as one of the most modern and prosperous regions of the Mexican republic.

Thus, both sides of the border sported a new, greatly expanded economy capable of sustaining substantially larger populations. Traditional extractive and agricultural industries were pushed into the background and were replaced by manufacturing and high-tech industries that relied heavily on government spending. New forms of industrialization emerged with the establishment of *maquiladoras*, or assembly plants. Cities throughout the binational borderlands assumed a new look, evolving from isolated, underdeveloped towns into modern, vibrant metropolises. Some urban centers progressed even further, assuming national prominence within their respective nations. At the border, cities like Ciudad Juárez-El Paso and Tijuana-San Diego became highly integrated binational centers of pronounced significance for both nation-states.

It is within that regional and international context that the experiences of borderlanders must be understood. Economic expansion and greater cross-border interdependence created new opportunities and

spurred rapid social change. *La frontera* and its people responded with enthusiasm and vigor to the new challenge.

Migration: Trends and Impact

Between the 1940s and 1980s, Mexican immigration to the United States reached unprecedented levels, and the border region deeply felt its impact. Undocumented migration constituted the principal flow, but legal entry and sanctioned contract-labor migration assumed major importance as well.

The dramatic rise began in 1942 when Mexico and the United States created the Bracero Program, a war-time emergency effort meant to provide the U. S. economy with a steady supply of Mexican workers, primarily in agriculture. Although originally intended to last only for the duration of the war, the program was renewed several times and was not terminated until 1964. During those years more than 4 million braceros entered the United States as temporary workers, returning to Mexico at the end of their contracts.

The Bracero Program primed both legal and illegal migration. Many workers obtained guarantees of permanent jobs in the United States from their employers, and that made them eligible to obtain legal residence status. Others who disliked the bureaucracy of the Bracero Program and who did not qualify for legal U. S. residency, crossed the border without documentation. In many cases employers encouraged braceros to forego the complications of participation in the Bracero Program, advising them instead to enter the country illegally. Undocumented status offered workers greater freedom of movement and freed employers from having to abide by wage and other obligations.

Whether braceros, legal immigrants or undocumented workers, the migrants had a profound effect on the border communities, swelling their populations with a constant stream of new arrivals, some only passersby but many others permanent additions to the already crowded cities. By dumping apprehended illegal aliens at the Mexican border, the U. S. government contributed to the problems that arose from the ever-present "floating" population.

The large volume of human traffic and the difficulty involved in regulating it inevitably produced border frictions, leading to intermittent international incidents. One incident of significance occurred in October, 1948, during an impasse in the negotiations between the two governments over the Bracero Program. A key point of contention was Mexico's insistence on adequate wages for Mexican workers, which U. S. employers strongly resisted. As talks dragged on, thousands of workers congregated in Ciudad Juárez waiting

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Field hands of the Bracero Program. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

for official certification as braceros. Meanwhile Texas cotton growers became anxious because the ongoing delay in the importation of workers threatened their already overripe crops. Hence, they successfully pressured the U. S. Immigration Service to allow the workers to cross the border without the requisite documentation. Border patrolmen, who normally apprehended undocumented people, then functioned as labor recruiters, “arresting” them at the Río Grande and “paroling” them to employers, who cheerfully transported their catch to the cotton fields. Mexico protested the blatant manipulation of its workers and the violation of existing bilateral agreements, and eventually the U. S. State Department issued an apology.

The availability of so many braceros and *mojados* (wetbacks) drove wages down along the border. Before the labor glut of the late 1940s, pickers typically received \$2.00 per hundred pounds of cotton, but that rate dropped to \$1.50 and even lower. Government agencies and community organizations also reported unsatisfactory working and living conditions among many workers. “Slaves are treated better than the men on some of the farms we have visited,” commented one U. S. immigration official in 1949. “Peonage conditions under which the wetbacks frequently live, eat, and sleep are horrible” (*El Paso Times*, Sept. 29, 1949).

Migration-related problems at the border peaked during Operation Wetback, the deportation program carried out by the U. S. government in 1954. That

year over one million Mexicans were deported from the United States directly into the Mexican border cities, where they created massive social problems. In less than a week during July, over 35,000 *deportados* crossed into Ciudad Juárez, severely straining the ability of that community to meet their many needs. Tijuana likewise felt the effect of congestion caused by *deportados*. At one point 15,000 workers and their families became stranded there, resorting to a variety of survival tactics. “Those *braceros* live in a series of miserable huts which they have built on the banks of the Tijuana river,” reported one newspaper. “They lack the most basic means of survival and find themselves forced to commit all manner of crimes. They do not care who will suffer as long as money can be obtained to take bread to their kin, for many of the stranded *braceros* brought their families with them” (*El Universal*, Sept. 17, 1954; trans. mine).

Operation Wetback and subsequent periodic “crackdown” campaigns curtailed the flow of undocumented migration for short periods, but as the U. S. demand for low-wage workers steadily picked up, *indocumentados* crossed the border in ever-increasing numbers. When the U. S. immigration law of 1965 made it much more difficult for non-skilled workers to obtain legal U. S. residency status, the undocumented traffic went up even more. By the late 1960s, a heated policy debate ensued in the United States over immigration. Several restrictionist bills were introduced in Congress in the 1970s and early 1980s to solve the problem, but each went down to defeat. Finally, in 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which enacted sanctions against employers of illegal aliens and granted amnesty to undocumented persons who had lived in the United States continuously since January 1, 1982. This landmark legislation promised to resolve the illegal alien problem once and for all, but by 1990 the best that could be said was that the law had diminished the migration flow somewhat. *Indocumentados* continued to enter the United States because strong U. S. demand for their services persisted and because employers found loopholes in the new law.

Along the border, hundreds of thousands of *indocumentados* took advantage of the amnesty provision to legalize their status. Social agencies and community organizations assisted in the effort to identify people who qualified for amnesty and also helped with the required paperwork. Successful applicants received temporary permission to stay in the United States; after a trial period of three years, during which the *amnistados* were expected to learn basic English and to move toward self-sufficiency while maintaining good character, they were eligible to apply for permanent residency.

Mexican Border Development Initiatives

One of the most significant recent changes on the Mexican frontier is the emphasis the federal government has placed on improving social and economic conditions. The turnaround in policy toward the border region began in 1960 when Mexico City established the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF), which sought to improve the physical appearance of border cities, expand consumption of national products by *fronterizos*, and increase tourism. PRONAF stimulated economic activity, provided new employment opportunities and made some border communities more attractive. It achieved only partial success, however, in making *fronterizos* less dependent on foreign consumer products. Tourism also did not rise as much as expected, due in some degree to PRONAF ineffectiveness, but more importantly because of recurring fluctuations in the U. S. economy, complications in crossing the border resulting from traffic congestion and constant negative publicity about Mexico carried in the U. S. media.

Maquiladoras

Five years after the creation of PRONAF, Mexican officials reacted favorably to a proposal from *fronterizo* entrepreneurs to initiate a Border Industrialization Program, whereby foreign corporations would be permitted to operate assembly plants on the border. These plants became popularly known as *maquiladoras*, and within a short time assumed great importance in the border economy and in the lives of borderlanders.

The growth in number of *maquiladoras* and employees is shown in Table 5. During the late 1960s, the program grew slowly, but by the 1970s *maquiladoras* mushroomed from one end of the border to the other. The greatest expansion occurred after 1982, when Mexican wages dropped sharply as a result of continuous currency devaluations during the years of economic crisis in Mexico. Thus, in 1988, 1,279 *maquiladoras* located in Mexico employed 329,000 workers, most of them on the border.

The lower wages placed Mexico in an exceedingly attractive position for U. S. and other multinationals seeking to establish operations in "offshore" locations. The wage advantage of Mexico is revealed in Table 6, which shows that in 1986 labor costs for *maquiladoras* were lower in Mexico than in seven other nations with production-sharing programs. There is no doubt that cheap wages have served as the primary attraction for multinationals to set up border factories, but other incentives include an abundant labor force, feeble unions, weak environmental

TABLE 5
Number of *Maquiladoras* and Employees
1966-1988

	Plants	Located on Border	Employees	% Employed at Border
1966	12	100	3,000	100
1970	120	N/A	20,000	N/A
1975	454	91	67,200	92
1980	620	89	119,500	89
1981	605	88	131,000	89
1982	585	88	127,000	89
1983	600	89	151,000	89
1984	672	88	199,000	89
1985	760	88	212,000	88
1986	890	87	250,000	84
1987	1125	85	305,000	N/A
1988	1279	82	329,000	81

Source: Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 144.

regulations, cooperative Mexican officials and proximity to U. S. markets.

Maquiladoras have brought considerable benefits to the border population. Above all, they have provided employment opportunities that would otherwise not exist. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican women in particular have been given a chance to earn a living, rather than relying on men for their support. The experience of working outside the home has made these women more independent and self-confident. Men have also taken advantage of *maquiladora* jobs as employers have modified earlier policies of hiring few male workers to do assembly work. The recent rise in the percentage of men in the ranks of *maquiladora* workers is shown in Table 7.

The existence of so many *maquiladoras* has stimulated activity in many sectors of the border economy, including construction, real estate, commerce, international trade and service concerns. Many Mexicans at the bottom end of the labor force have been able to make a living by performing tasks in support of *maquiladora* workers; jitney drivers, ambulatory merchants and child-care workers constitute some examples.

For Mexico as a whole, the *maquiladoras* have helped considerably in easing the unemployment problem and in coping with the sizeable foreign debt. By the late 1980s, *maquiladoras* had become the second most important generator of foreign exchange, with the oil industry occupying the top position.

U. S. borderlanders have also benefitted from the *maquiladoras*, for there has been a significant spillover effect across the border. The most salient benefits for

TABLE 6
Comparative Labor Costs—Dollars Per Hour,
Including Benefits, 1986

Country	Wage
Mexico	0.89
Dominican Republic	0.95
Costa Rica	1.05
Jamaica	1.25
Hong Kong	2.05
Singapore	2.30
Taiwan	2.95
Korea	3.65

Source: Author's files

Chicanos have been employment opportunities in supervisory and managerial positions. Thus, many Chicanos have become daily commuters, going from their U. S. homes to jobs in Mexico. In addition, Chicano business persons have become suppliers and consultants for maquiladoras. At a more general level, U. S. border communities have derived benefits from greater retail sales to maquiladora workers, and from the establishment of transportation, warehousing, and other maquiladora support services north of the border. Many Chicanos are employed in these operations.

For all the positive things that might be said about maquiladoras, there are many negatives as well. On the Mexican side, the rapid growth of the program has created countless nightmares for communities without the resources to provide the infrastructure necessary to support the people associated with or attracted to the border by the maquiladoras. Thus, hundreds of thousands of poor fronterizos have been forced to live in primitive conditions, many even lacking basic services like water and electricity. Overcrowding has led to shortages of schools and attendant social problems. Air and water pollution have assumed alarming levels in some areas. Some maquiladoras have contributed directly to pollution by ignoring waste-disposal regulations. For example, it is common for large numbers of poor fronterizos to store drinking water in drums disposed of by maquiladoras, drums that formerly contained harmful chemicals. Not surprisingly, the incidence of disease arising from water contamination is exceedingly high along the border.

On the U. S. side, the primary concern with maquiladoras has been the loss of jobs. Since the late 1960s, many communities located in the interior of the country have complained of plant closures by companies that have relocated assembly operations in Mexico. U. S. labor unions have been particularly vocal in demanding an end to the maquiladora program, but their efforts have thus far been unsuccessful. At the

border itself, many labor-intensive manufacturers such as garment producers have reduced or eliminated operations on the U. S. side, shifting such work to the Mexican side. The loss of jobs has angered Chicano workers but, lacking political clout, they have been unable to reverse the trend.

Another negative effect of the maquiladoras for the U. S. side has been greater immigration pressures arising from the ever-increasing labor force south of the border. The prospect of maquiladora jobs has attracted large numbers of Mexicans from the interior to Ciudad Juárez and other centers of assembly plants. Many of these workers eventually wind up competing for jobs with border Chicanos when their plans for obtaining maquiladora jobs fail to materialize, or when they leave such jobs in preference of higher wages in the United States for similar or even less demanding work.

Maquiladoras, then, have become highly controversial, but all signs point to the reality that they are a permanent feature of border life, at least in the near future. Mexico must have sources of employment and foreign exchange, and maquiladoras satisfy such needs. The United States is struggling to remain competitive in the world economy, and maquiladoras, with their low cost and high productivity, provide an important part of the answer to that challenge. As long as those conditions remain on both sides of the border, assembly plants will loom large in the economy of the region.

Maquiladora workers dramatically exemplify one of the major dilemmas faced by borderlanders—external dependence and vulnerability. Like assembly-line

TABLE 7
Percentage of Women and Men in the
Maquiladora Labor Force, 1975-1988

	% Women	% Men
1975	78.3	21.7
1976	78.8	21.2
1977	78.0	22.0
1978	76.8	23.2
1979	77.1	22.9
1980	77.3	22.7
1981	77.4	22.6
1982	77.2	22.8
1983	74.5	25.5
1984	70.9	29.1
1985	69.0	31.0
1986	68.2	31.8
1987	66.0	34.0
1988	64.2	35.8

Source: Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 167.

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Maquiladora workers boarding a bus near the RCA assembly plant in Juárez, Mexico. (Courtesy of *The Catholic Herald*.)

workers, other low-wage earners in the border labor market, whether employed in urban or rural industries, face chronic economic insecurity as well. Hence large segments of the border population, in particular recent migrants from interior zones in Mexico, manifest characteristics of an underclass, living outside the “mainstream.” That marginalization is reflective of larger international relationships that have direct impact on borderlanders.

One of the prime indications of economic vulnerability is high unemployment, and the border region certainly stands out as a zone particularly affected by that problem. Some communities on the Mexican side have unemployment rates of 25 percent and above, while on the U. S. side border unemployment levels far surpass national averages. In the mid-1980s, for example, El Paso’s unemployment rate stood at 10 percent, and some urban centers in the Texas Lower Río Grande Valley surpassed 20 percent.

Social Change

While post-World War II growth has brought increased external dependence to borderlanders, it has also raised the standard of living among those segments of the population most favorably situated to take advantage of new opportunities. Upper- and middle-class Mexican *fronterizos*, for example, have derived enormous benefits from the rise in cross-border interaction. Entrepreneurs have amassed fortunes

from real estate transactions, construction contracts, and industrial and commercial ventures. Professional and technical workers have also improved their position with the greater availability of well-paying jobs and opportunities for consulting work. The purchasing power of all these sectors has risen significantly, with a corresponding improvement in their material welfare.

Similar trends can be detected among affluent Chicanos north of the border, but since this social sector comprises a small portion of the total U. S. border Hispanic population, such gains are at best in the modest range. Nevertheless, the improved position of upper- and middle-class Chicanos is reflected in increased ownership of expensive homes and thriving businesses, and in much greater political representation. For example, in cities like Brownsville and Laredo, where Hispanics comprise 85 percent and 92 percent of the cities’ population respectively, Chicanos are in firm control of local politics, occupying the top elected and appointed positions. In El Paso, the level of representation is lower, but members of the group nonetheless occupy prominent political positions.

Over the last few decades, many Chicanos from the working class have also been able to advance to the middle class, thus raising their living standards and increasing the chances for greater social mobility for subsequent generations. In the case of El Paso, by 1970 about 24 percent of the Spanish-surname labor force occupied low-paying unskilled positions compared to 41 percent three decades earlier. Conversely,

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A maquiladora in Juárez, Mexico. (Courtesy of The Catholic Herald.)

36 percent occupied white-collar positions in 1970 compared to only 20 percent in 1940.

Such advances have made it possible for greater numbers of border Hispanics to receive advanced education, allowing them to become more effectively integrated into national life. By the mid-1980s, the number of Chicanos in major border area universities had risen significantly, as illustrated by the University of Texas Pan-American, where about 80 percent of the student body was Hispanic, and the University of Texas El Paso, where almost 50 percent of the enrollment was Hispanic.

Conclusion

The way of life of the people of the borderlands has evolved significantly since the days of Spanish control over the region. During the years of early colonization, vast distances, isolation, sparse population, Indian raiding and foreign threats sustained a precariousness that precluded growth and development. That climate of separateness and uncertainty prevailed for several centuries, but in the first half of the nineteenth century some dramatic changes took place that profoundly altered the destiny of borderlanders. Mexican independence forged a new bilateral relationship between two former colonies, Mexico and the United States, whose principal official interaction for several decades after 1821 consisted of defining their common border. That process proved painful for Mexico in particular because it led to the loss of half its national territory,

along with the absorption of about 100,000 of its citizens by the now physically expanded United States.

With the finalization of the boundary, Mexicans and Americans began to move to the immediate border region, first in small numbers and later in larger waves. A system of cross-border economic and social interaction evolved, linking the people of both sides into ever closer relationships. Political stabilization and incipient modernization in the later nineteenth century strengthened existing ties, providing a strong foundation for the high degree of interdependence that would be achieved in the twentieth century. Since 1920, that interdependence has been manifested in substantial trade and intense migration.

Today Mexican and Chicano *fronterizos* enjoy the fruits of healthy economic growth and rising opportunity in their region, but they also confront dilemmas and predicaments associated with explosive population expansion and rapid industrialization. Overcrowding, scarcity of resources, shortages of basic services, pollution, poverty, unemployment, and tensions related to border enforcement pose acute problems for *fronterizos*. Additionally, issues related to identity and culture are of constant concern because of the powerful U. S. integrative forces that envelop the region.

Such challenges are not new, however, and over time the border population has learned to cope with them. Governmental assistance has been enlisted to aid in resolving social problems, and cultural strategies have been developed on both sides to maintain the strong Hispanic heritage that characterizes the area. In

A parade in New York City for National Farmworkers Week, 1975. (Courtesy of *The Catholic Herald*.)

general, *fronterizos* are well aware of limitations imposed by factors peculiar to their region, but they are confident of their own abilities to overcome obstacles and are optimistic that progress will continue to come their way.



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