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# HISTORY OF MEXICAN AMERICANS

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From 1900 - 1965



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## The Great Migration (1900 – 1930)

Migration from Mexico has been noted as some of the largest of mass immigrations to the United States in the country's history. This makes Mexicans, both citizens and descendants, one of the largest minority groups within the United States. For this reason, historians have placed the label of "The Great Migration" upon the era of 1900 to 1930 whereupon the greatest number of immigrants entered the country in its history (Gonzales, 1999).

It started in Mexico with the Mexican Revolution, an upheaval from 1910 to 1920 that led to the downfall of a 30 year dictatorship and the establishment of a constitutional republic (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). There had been a stir of discontent amongst people in the late eighteenth century, which eventually led to the support of opposition to "elitist and oligarchical policies of [Dictator] Porfirio Díaz that favored wealthy landowners and industrialists" (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica).

The original support for Díaz had been for his efforts to make his country great after the downfalls they faced early in the nineteenth century, directly after declaring independence. This support came into question though, as it became apparent that the strong European minority was greatly reaping the benefits of Díaz's efforts, holding an

upper class position above those people of whom Díaz asked to make sacrifices for security. That security's price had been liberties and the dissatisfaction was a considerable influence in the upheaval of Mexico (Gonzales, 1999).

This revolution was not without its won prices either. Each revolutionary leader that took power or rose up to create progress and change in Mexico was met with death, most often assassination. Francisco Madero is among those famous revolutionaries, a man from a wealthy family who successfully took up power, but found it difficult to hold as he was assassinated by counter-revolutionists three months after gaining presidency in November of 1911. The revolutionary war tactics of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa are some of the more famous revolutionists. Zapata was known for fighting for "land and liberty," while Villa was well known as a bandit. On top of the deaths of those who lead the rebellion were the men, women and children, numbering between 1.5 and 2 million (Gonzales, 1999).

Being as this was during the time of the Gold Rush in California and Mexicans saw themselves as indigenous to the South West area, it was relatively easy for them to see the point of moving. Work was being offered from the railroad industry and the expansion of agriculture brought workers to economic destinations in the South West.

These are important factors and reasons for why Mexicans immigrated to the

United States. Escaping a dangerous revolution and financial gain were prospects that ignited massive numbers in immigration. But the story does not end with entry to the United States. These migrants often came under scrutiny as a minority, they followed work where they could, and often ended up with low wages for back-breaking work that made migration a difficult life choice and a harshened aspect of life for Mexican immigrants (Gonzales, 1999).

#### The Depression (1930 – 1940)

Well known throughout the United States to be a time of hardships after Wallstreet's devastating collapse, the Depression hit the country hard and effected people on all levels and statuses. There were many factors that incorporated to the real problem that the entire country faced, and while "the Mexican Problem" was not highly regarded throughout the country, having it as a concept in some parts of the country created Anti-Mexican sentiments. This sentiment was laid on more heavily than before, as the sentiment contributed the entire issue of the Depression itself to Mexican migrant workers (Gonzales, 1999). Preceding censuses, even ones that could not account for illegal immigrants, found Mexicans to be the largest immigrant minority in the country during this period, especially before the Great Depression (Balderrama, Rodriguez, 1995).

It was with little justification that Mexicans were given the short end of the stick financially. From 1930 to 1940, a system of employment was formed that denied Mexican immigrants and native born Mexicans from achieving success by refusing them higher paying jobs. They were reduced to the backbreaking work that their race was stereotypically boxed into by the other castes of this established system (Gonzales, 1999). So when the stock market collapsed in October of 1929, Mexicans among other immigrants were forced into greater hardships, even those who retained work barely made a meager wage. In the following months, the Great Depression set in, and by March of 1930, approximately 3.2 million people were unemployed, an increase from the 1.5 million before the crash (American Experience).

This added to the hardships already being experienced by Mexican immigrants, many of which entered illegally. It is noted in chapter 5 in *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, that most Mexican immigrants likely entered illegally or through irregular channels. For this reason, many Mexicans were hit with forceful fear when threatened with local authority and border patrol (Gonzales, 1999). Deportation was a reality that many Mexican workers faced, and it often came at work sites just before payday by scrupulous employers. In this, Mexican workers were given insufficient wages for hard labor, and rounded up like animals by local authorities,

adding up to a treatment of being less deserving than those Americans of Euro-descent.

#### Mexican Americans in WWII (1940 – 1965)

When Japan struck Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the United States was forced into War. For Mexicanos, this became a chance to join America's mainstream culture, a chance for a group that was predominantly descendants of immigrants, rather than immigrants themselves. Being a large group at this point, their military participation was high, though the military counted "Latinos" as being whites, making the census on Mexicans in the military unavailable (Gonzales, 1999).

As Mexicans faced problems, staying in small towns, with low wages and little promise of climbing the ladder in America's socioeconomic ranking of status, military participation was promising for them. It gave an immediate loophole to their problems, offering them a job and a way upwards from their current standing socioeconomic status (Gonzales, 1999).

The significant efforts of Mexican Americans were shortsighted in the long run. Ken Burns' fourteen-hour documentary titled *The War* managed to leave out this significant group from acknowledgment for efforts in World War II. This was met with outrage in 2007, generating a widespread protest campaign to bring awareness for Mexican Americans' involvement. Thousands of these people were sent into battle, they

comprised a large portion of the New Mexico National Guard stationed in the Philippines, many of them were forced to surrender to the Japanese, and hundreds died on the infamous Bataan Death March in 1942. With such high loss and grief for the community, it is highly understandable that there would be outrage and frustration with a *fourteen*-hour film documenting the war (Gonzales, 1999).

But, even more vague than Hispanic men's roles in the war is Hispanic women's role in World War II, even among the entirety of the group. Their accounts and experiences of war have only recently been noted by Chicana scholars, noting that like the men, women also applied a huge effort and influence to the war. These women served from home, selling war bonds and setting up organizations that helped servicemen and servicewomen. They also joined other American women in filling the niches of the workforce left open by men who left for the war.

Following the war, in its aftermath, Europe was left a wreck, and did not pose much of a challenge for the United States in regards to the marketplace. This made the agricultural workforce in America flourish, as they gained a new niche to fill up, during Europe's recovery. This led to a program called the Bracero Program, in which Mexican nationals were recruited to work to fulfill the growing labor needs, but only on a temporary basis of course.

This guest worker program became problematic when flagrant abuses became prevalent. It was revitalized in the early fifties following World War II, due to shrinking labor market in the fields, but because of previous abuses, Mexican officials were determined to protect their own and so they put in careful processes to make sure that these abuses would not happen again, especially in Texas, where they happened most often (Gonzales, 1999).

#### Conclusion

The journey of Mexican Americans has been a long journey from the low class worker to an equal on most fronts. Many of the stereotypes that held the group down as recent as the 50's and 60's still exist to this day and are encountered on a daily basis, for many Mexican descendants. For this reason, America has yet to provide Mexicans – immigrants and their descendants – with a truly equal set of opportunities on every front that Euro-descended Americans can succeed in. However, I do believe that the march of progress is headed in that general direction for Hispanic minorities.



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