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A Voluntary Exodus?
Self-Repatriation from the U.S. to Mexico during the 1930s

ABSTRACT: *During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a mass migration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans left the U.S. for Mexico. These migrants either saw themselves forced by local, state, or federal policies; enticed by various promises from the Mexican government to revitalize its country's economy and infrastructure in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution; or prompted by personal reasons. Based on contemporary media accounts and oral histories, this article sets aside the mainstream narrative of forced repatriation to highlight the highly individual considerations that led many to leave on their own.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; 1930s; Great Depression; Mexican Americans; U.S.; California; Mexico; migration; repatriation; oral history*

Introduction

On January 2, 2006, Melissa Block of National Public Radio (NPR) interviewed California State Senator Joe Dunn, a Democrat representing the state's 34th Senate District, including north Orange County. Their conversation focused on the successful passage of a bill Dunn had authored, namely, the *Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program*, in which California acknowledged its role in the repatriation of over two million Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1930s.[1] Yet, Senator Dunn's interview did not address the various reasons why these individuals and families had repatriated in the first place. While their number is staggering, the reasons for their repatriation are our focus here.

The repatriation movement can be attributed to three primary factors. The first, and best known of these encompasses the U.S. government's policies, as well as those of local and state governments, toward both Mexican citizens living in the U.S. and American citizens of Mexican descent.[2] The second factor is the Mexican government's active policy of reaching out to Mexicans in the U.S. to convince them to move back to their native land with the promise of land and a stable future.[3] The third and least known factor in the repatriation movement revolves around an individual's choice to leave for personal reasons that ranged from a lack of economic opportunities in the U.S. to a disruption in family dynamic.[4]

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[1] Joe Dunn, interview by Melissa Block, "Remembering California's 'Repatriation Program'," January 2, 2006, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, audio (00:04:23) and transcript.

[2] Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana, 1919-1945,"*Indiana Magazine of History* 77, no. 4 (December 1981): 333-357, here 348.

[3] "Repatriation Plan Outlined: Mexico Allocates Land for Colonies," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1939.

[4] Hortencia Martinez de Benítez, interview by Christine Valenciana, La Habra, CA, December 20, 1972, Oral History (OH) 1298, transcript, Mexican American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

Apart from contemporary newspaper articles, the evidence for my investigation comes primarily from oral histories, particularly the interviews of Herbert Sanchez, Carmen Landeros, and Hortencia Martinez de Benítez, as well as Emilia Castaneda de Valenciana and Theresa Martinez Southard, all conducted by Christine Valenciana in the early 1970s for the Mexican American Oral History Project of the Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History at California State University, Fullerton. Herbert Sanchez, shares the story of his family, which included his father, step-mother, and three brothers, and how they were affected by the U.S. government's repatriation policy.[5] Carmen Landeros speaks to the role that the Mexican government played in enticing a family member of hers to self-repatriate to Mexico.[6] Hortencia Martinez de Benítez relates that she, her parents, and thirteen siblings made the voluntary move to Mexico by train.[7] These personal accounts, as well as others, provide an in-depth understanding of why these individuals and their families left, and under what circumstances.

Repatriation has received a limited amount of scholarly attention. Abraham Hoffman has been an expert on Mexican and Mexican American repatriation since the 1970s, primarily analyzing the U.S. government's various 1930s policies.[8] In an exemplary regional study, Neil Betten and Raymond A. Mohl have discussed the attitude of a local municipal government and its effect on the immigrant population of Gary, Indiana.[9] Hoffman, meanwhile, has also addressed the Mexican government's role in trying to convince Mexican nationals to return to Mexico voluntarily.[10] The irony of Mexican workers being praised for their labor before the Great Depression, a view that changed dramatically once the U.S. went into economic free fall, has been the focus of Dennis Nodin Valdes's work.[11]

During the interwar years, the Great Depression and the economic recovery due to President Roosevelt's Great New Deal took center stage in U.S. history. Yet, the U.S. government's policy of repatriating Mexican Americans and Mexican citizens back to Mexico, along with the reasons why individuals and their families

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[5] Herbert Sanchez, interview by Christine Valenciana, Los Angeles, CA, August 29, 1971, Oral History (OH) 0752, transcript, Mexican American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

[6] Carmen Landeros, interview by Christine Valenciana, Los Angeles, CA, August 7, 1971, Oral History (OH) 0745, transcript, Mexican American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

[7] Martinez de Benítez, OH 1298, transcript.

[8] Abraham Hoffman, "Stimulus to Repatriation: The 1931 Federal Deportation Drive and the Los Angeles Community," *Pacific Historical Review* 42, no. 2 (May 1973): 205-219.

[9] Neil Betten and Raymond A. Mohl, "From Discrimination to Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary, Indiana, during the Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 42, no. 3 (August 1973): 370-388.

[10] Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (first published 1973; Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 84-85.

[11] Dennis Nodin Valdes, "Mexican Revolutionary Nationalism and Repatriation during the Great Depression," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 1-23, here 7.

left, continues to be overlooked. This paper argues that, while forced repatriation is undoubtedly tragic, there were those who decided to leave on their own. Both the Mexican and U.S. governments, as well as state and municipal authorities, played a role in dictating policy during the interwar period, and various policies to support self-repatriation will be addressed first.

I. U.S. Pressure

The repatriation movement originated with the federal government and spread to local governments and public organizations as a way to decrease the number of people in need of jobs or unemployment assistance. Those supporting the policy believed that Mexican aliens were a burden and therefore should be removed from the U.S.—an attitude that became an integral part of the repatriation movement and affected many people of Mexican descent throughout the U.S.

In his interview, Mr. Sanchez relates his experience with repatriation and how the U.S. government forced people of Mexican descent back to Mexico because they allegedly were a financial burden to society.[12] While Mr. Sanchez does not remember who exactly was telling Mexican citizens that they had to leave, he recalls that "[t]hey had to go back 'cause they can't take care of people. Like when they, when they come over here, immigration, to live in the state, they have to, they make the people tell them that they [are] not going to be supported by the county."[13] In his work, Hoffman highlights U.S. Secretary of Labor William N. Doak's xenophobic approach to tackling the high unemployment rate, namely, that deporting illegal aliens would lessen the stress on the labor market and therefore improve the chances of American citizens to find a job.[14]

In a speech made on September 7, 1931, in Johnson City, Tennessee, Labor Secretary Doak touted the increase from 180,000 to 760,000 public construction workers, while pointing out the decrease in immigrants then coming into the U.S.[15] In the same speech, he blamed the previously large influx of immigrants for the oversupply of labor in some areas. Doak's strategy of sharing news of positive job growth, while mentioning the allegedly negative impact of immigration on the economy, was intended to sway the public in favor of repatriation measures. Doak stated: "The deportation of these alien enemies of the country requires greater effort than in the case of any other class."[16] Thus, public speeches by members of the U.S. government pushed the narrative that Mexicans and Mexican Americans were to blame for the lack of jobs throughout the country, thereby fueling a pro-repatriation sentiment among a public already battered by the Great Depression.

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[12] Sanchez, OH 0752, transcript.

[13] Sanchez, OH 0752, transcript.

[14] Hoffman, "Stimulus to Repatriation," 205-219.

[15] "Doak Says Upturn Is Due before Long," *New York Times*, September 8, 1931.

[16] "Doak Says Upturn Is Due," *New York Times*, September 8, 1931.

Public sentiment toward those of Mexican descent was quite negative. Betten's and Mohl's 1973 article discusses a related case of racism that occurred in Gary, Indiana. The living conditions in local areas inhabited by Mexicans were deplorable, leading to rampant malnourishment and a rise in tuberculosis of epidemic proportions.[17] Even in the Catholic Church, where one would expect refuge from daily harassment, Mexican Catholics found it difficult to be accepted. Many of them were asked to pay 25 cents at the church door and leave another 25 cents in the collection plate. In response, Mexican Catholics started their own congregations.[18] Discrimination also occurred in the workplace, as those Mexicans who had jobs were forced to bribe their supervisors to retain their jobs, and those whose skin color was deemed too dark were simply not hired. As the idea of repatriation became popular among manufacturing leaders like Horace S. Norton, superintendent of U.S. Steel's Gary Works, H. B. Snyder, president of the Gary Reconstruction Association, and Walter J. Riley, head of the Twin City Manufacturers Organization, the city of Gary, too, began to remove Mexicans from its city limits.[19]

On the West Coast, repatriation was in full swing in states like California, home to a large concentration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, especially in the Los Angeles area. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on April 16, 1934, that the Welfare Department had scheduled a return of Mexicans for April 25.[20] By stating that the Welfare Department was organizing the deportation, the article led its readers to associate welfare with Mexicans (or the latter's removal). Moreover, the article indicated that the county would provide a stipend to those who would leave voluntarily. Misleadingly, the article asserted that these plans were being made to repatriate "a large number of Mexican citizens from Los Angeles County to the homes across the border."[21] This suggested that those who were being sent back were simply living right across the border when, in fact, the U.S.-Mexican border was almost 2,000 miles long, and post-Revolution Mexico consisted of almost 30 different states, any of which could be the home of those being repatriated.

In cities across the U.S., relief organizations like the American Legion took a stance on repatriation and argued, for example, that the removal of Mexicans from the city of Chicago would reduce the local unemployment rate and therefore solve the economic crisis.[22] A trustee from North Township, Indiana (just south of Chicago), wrote to Labor Secretary Doak: "Here is our problem—to rid this community of Mexicans […] By them leaving, our unemployment problem here

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[17] Betten and Mohl, "From Discrimination to Repatriation," 373.

[18] Betten and Mohl, "From Discrimination to Repatriation," 375-376.

[19] Betten and Mohl, "From Discrimination to Repatriation," 379-380.

[20] "Return of Mexicans Scheduled: Repatriates Will Leave on 25th Inst., Welfare Department Announces," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1934.

[21] "Return of Mexicans Scheduled," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1934.

[22] Rosales and Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience," 347.

in this city, and in fact of almost the entire Lake County would be solved."[23] The problem they faced, though, was that the majority of Mexicans in the East Chicago region could not be deported because this would have violated immigration laws. Since the federal government could not provide the necessary funds to fuel the repatriation project, advocates of the plan were left to seek funds from local sources. The hardships many Mexicans were experiencing caused them to depend on local relief organizations for aid. Yet, this dependence provided the perfect opening to force them to "choose" to leave for Mexico. Many relief organizations made it more difficult for Mexicans to receive aid, and others simply denied them aid altogether.[24] Once they had no choice but to return to Mexico, several railroad lines headed to the central states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Jalisco, which were the home states of the majority of Mexicans residing in the Midwest.

In a cruel twist of fate, even Mexicans under medical care were targeted by city officials. According to an article, "Supervisor Seeks Return of ILL Indigents to Mexico," printed in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 24, 1938, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors member Gordon L. McDonough was reaching out to the Mexican government to approve a plan to repatriate tuberculosis patients who were costing the county $89,500 dollars annually.[25] Authorized by the Board of Supervisors, McDonough traveled to Mexico to convince the authorities to accept the repatriation of 148 Mexican-born tuberculosis patients who, at the time, were being cared for at the Olive View Sanatorium in Sylmar. The article addresses the history of the repatriation program, stating that, over the years, more than 14,000 "indigents" had been returned to Mexico.[26] It suggests that Los Angeles County representatives were optimistic that their plan to repatriate tuberculosis patients would be welcomed by Mexican officials because of the repatriation program's prior success and Mexico's acceptance of repatriates. The audacity of these local officials who were considering a plan where human beings, who were receiving medical care, would be rounded up and sent back to a country where the health care they would receive might well be inadequate is simply despicable. Yet, this was just another example of the lack of empathy that ran rampant through the city of Los Angeles when it came to Mexicans.

Years earlier, another incident in Los Angeles had been the raid at La Placita Olvera. On February 26, 1931, under orders from the local superintendent of Immigration services, Walter E. Carr, immigration agents from San Diego, San Francisco, and even Nogales, Arizona, joined Los Angeles agents to conduct a planned operation to round up illegal immigrants at La Placita Olvera.[27] The raid

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[23] Rosales and Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience," 347.

[24] Rosales and Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience," 348.

[25] "Supervisor Seeks Return of ILL Indigents to Mexico," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1938.

[26] "Supervisor Seeks Return," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1938.

[27] Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1995), 73.

was the first of its kind. As Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez point out, when immigration officials questioned an individual's legal status at a place of business, they pulled them aside one by one. The raid itself was meant to have an adverse psychological effect on the Mexican community. The message was that, out in public, they were not safe from the authorities. Unlike previous instances, when local authorities had worked with Mexican officials on issues of immigration, this raid was the exact opposite. As soon as word got out that the raid was taking place, Mexican Vice Consuls Ricardo G. Hill and Joel Quiñones went to La Placita Olvera to help their harassed countrymen and were themselves mistreated until they announced their diplomatic status.[28] When Quiñones questioned Carr about the raid, Carr responded that the raid was not targeting Mexicans and gave as proof that three individuals of European descent and one of Asian descent had also been apprehended.[29]

While raids like the one at La Placita Olvera in 1931 made front-page news, Melita Marie Garza has shown that 1931 was the peak of repatriation to Mexico.[30] The following year, 77,453 Mexicans were repatriated, roughly half the number of the year before, and there was a continuing downward trend of Mexicans being repatriated, month after month, up until 1937.[31] In 1930, over 1.4 million Mexicans had been living in the U.S., and three-fourths of them had been concentrated in the southwestern states of California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico.[32] The agricultural sector in these states had attracted Mexican migrants who still had jobs during the Great Depression, and this made them a target.

The hypocrisy of government officials like Labor Secretary Doak, who claimed that deporting Mexicans would improve the economy, was bad enough. Worse, though, this assertion was accepted by state and municipal leaders who then pursued their own xenophobic repatriation programs. The scapegoating of Mexicans as the reason for the lack of jobs was easily embraced by suffering and dejected members of the American working class. The U.S. government's propaganda led to the systematic targeting of an entire ethnic group, regardless of immigration status, which, in turn, provided the Mexican government with a platform to reach out to its expatriates and entice them to return home.

II. A New Beginning in a Familiar Place

Unlike the strategies evident in the U.S. repatriation program, the Mexican government could not force its expatriates to return home. The pressure put on Mexicans and Mexican American citizens to leave the U.S. for Mexico was actually

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[28] Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 74.

[29] Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 74.

[30] Melita Marie Garza, "They Came to Toil: News Frames of Wanted and Unwanted Mexicans in the Great Depression" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012), 182.

[31] Garza, "They Came to Toil," 182.

[32] Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (first published 2005; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 16.

alleviated by the Mexican government through the promise of a better life by offering arable land and economic opportunity. What is more, Mexico proclaimed itself a safe haven once again, since hundreds of thousands of Mexicans had fled to the U.S. during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.[33] To propagate its message to Mexicans living in the U.S., the Mexican government worked hand in hand with its northern neighbors and initiated a number of outreach programs.

Individuals found that the opportunity of gaining land and the possibility of becoming self-reliant after experiencing economic turmoil in the U.S. was a chance they could not pass up. From Carmen Landeros's interview, we learn that her sister left for Mexico on her own, without being forced by local or U.S. authorities, based on the promise of a better life in Mexico. Her sister, a teacher, ended up obtaining land from the Mexican government with the goal of building her own school. Mrs. Landeros describes her sister's ordeal with building the school in her interview: "They gave her land to build a school. There was never a school in that place, and she built it from the trunks of palms […] and then she would go and find the skins of the snakes inside buildings. But she built her school and she taught there for about seven years."[34]

During the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río between 1934 and 1940, the Mexican government prepared for the possibility of an influx of compatriots from the U.S.[35] Cárdenas, a former governor of the state of Michoacán, one of the areas hardest hit with high levels of migration, knew that this influx was inevitable. Indeed, by the end of 1934, Los Angeles County was on the verge of deporting between 15,000 to 20,000 families back to Mexico.[36] A strategy had to be laid out to make the whole process of accepting repatriates back into the country as seamless as possible. Thus, the incoming Minister of Industry and Commerce (*Secretario de la Economía Nacional*), Francisco J. Múgica, launched a system of gathering information on which individuals would be migrating back, what skills they possessed, and what their economic potential was.[37] In the case of Mrs. Landeros's sister, her profession as a teacher proved to be valuable to the Mexican government, and she thus found an opportunity to establish her roots.

On October 31, 1938, the *Los Angeles Times* published a story that Ricardo G. Hill, the former Mexican Consul in Los Angeles, who had been present during the La Placita Raid, was introducing a bill to encourage repatriation in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies as a Representative from the state of Sonora. This bill, Hill

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[33] Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 42.

[34] Landeros, OH 0745, transcript.

[35] Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, *They Should Stay There: The Story of Mexican Migration and Repatriation during the Great Depression*, trans. Russ Davidson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 51.

[36] Enciso, *They Should Stay There*, 52.

[37] Enciso, *They Should Stay There*, 53.

stated, would only apply to Mexicans who were "at present unemployed and in dire financial straits."[38] The bill itself was rather vague and originally asked for "various Mexicans" without giving an exact number of those who might be suffering economically at that time. At any rate, that Mexican authorities were playing an active role in trying to reach out to potential Mexican repatriates and to accommodate them once they arrived home.

Over a year later, as reported by the *Los Angeles Times* on January 30, 1939, five Mexican consuls from California met in Los Angeles to hammer out how to deal with the escalating issue of "indigent" Mexican citizens. The article stressed that Mexico had to first prepare for the potential of a large number of Mexican repatriates before a more concrete plan could be adopted.[39] The Mexican government used their consuls in two primary ways that proved to be vital in the repatriation process. It introduced a plan by which federally owned land would be given to repatriates to create agricultural colonies only after going through a vetting process headed by the consuls.[40] Secondly, consuls actively supervised the departure of repatriates back to Mexico from California, Texas, and other states.[41] In light of the racism toward Mexican nationals in the U.S., having their own consuls supervise their transportation back to Mexico provided some comfort to these repatriates. The chance to return home, own land, and do so without a racist environment was an opportunity many Mexicans found hard to ignore. When local officials floated the idea of repatriation in the Los Angeles area, Mexican Consul Rafael de la Colina welcomed the prospect of playing a role in the process. Moving forward, he implemented a policy by which an official member of the Mexican Consulate would accompany large groups of repatriates as they embarked on their journey back to Mexico.[42]

On April 19, 1939, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that the repatriation plan had finally been outlined by the Mexican Undersecretary of State Ramón Beteta Quintana. Under the new plan, any person over the age of 18 would receive a maximum of 20 acres of irrigated land or a maximum of 50 acres that was tillable but unirrigated. This land would be located in three recently established agricultural colonies, namely in the state of Tamaulipas, in Mexicali, and in the state of Sinaloa.[43] In addition to the enticing opportunity to own property, the

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[38] "Repatriation Asked for Mexicans Here," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1938.

[39] "Mexican Consuls Confer on Return of Indigents," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1939.

[40] R. Reynolds McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma at Norman, 1982), 42.

[41] McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation," 41.

[42] Brian Gratton and Emily Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950," *The International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 944-975, here 950.

[43] "Repatriation Plan Outlined," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1939.

Mexican government also guaranteed loans from the National Bank from the time repatriates would arrive on their land until the first harvest.[44]

Along with Mexican government officials taking a hands-on approach in the U.S. to support those who wanted to repatriate, there was also an active social movement. Considered the top muralist in the world, Diego Rivera was very active in Detroit, Michigan, during the early 1930s. From April 1932 to March 1933, Rivera was commissioned to complete artwork for the Detroit Institute of Arts.[45] His works paid tribute to Detroit manufacturing and the various cultures that had helped it grow over the years. Rivera then started the League of Mexican Laborers and Farm Workers organization which worked with the authorities of both Mexico and Michigan to coordinate the repatriation of Mexican citizens.[46]

The support system put in place by the Mexican government for returning compatriots was well-intentioned and well planned. It not only created a welcoming environment through the creation of agricultural colonies but also gave migrants the opportunity to thrive by offering them a guaranteed loan. It would seem that the risk of staying in the U.S., where they were unjustly targeted simply for being Mexicans, far outweighed the risk of failing in these new colonies. Yet, there were also those Mexican families who the U.S. "on their own" for personal reasons.

III. Personal Reasons

When reporting how many Mexicans were being deported back to Mexico, local newspapers in the U.S. rarely provided much context. They primarily publicized the numbers of those who were deported and the frequency with which deportations were taking place. Local sentiments definitely leaned against Mexicans, and this played a part in how local governments took charge of their repatriation programs. Usually overlooked, there were many instances of Mexicans leaving the U.S. for Mexico for either economic or personal reasons, and without being forced or coerced by the federal, state, or local governments.

In her interview, Hortencia Martinez de Benítez shares that she, her parents, and her thirteen siblings made the move to Mexico via train. She relates that her father paid the train fare for everyone himself. She also emphasizes that they were able to acquire land and a ranch to live at, and that it was their own.[47] Like many other families in the U.S. during the Great Depression, Mrs. Martinez de Benítez's family was experiencing economic difficulties. As she points out, there were instances when individuals made the decision to repatriate for personal reasons and not—or not primarily—due to intimidation or coercion. In her case, one cannot overlook that the sheer size of her family and the lack of economic

[44] "Repatriation Plan Outlined," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1939.

[45] Garza, "They Came to Toil," 199.

[46] Garza, "They Came to Toil," 200.

[47] Martinez de Benítez, OH 1298, transcript.

opportunities in the U.S. played an integral role in her father's decision to move the family back to Mexico.

When the repatriation movement gained steam between 1930 and 1931, many Mexicans had already been returning to Mexico on their own for months. Apart from the obvious economic factors, many took advantage of the Mexican government's offer for the duty-free admittance of vehicles and agricultural implements.[48] This relatively minor offer of waiving fees meant a lot since many of those returning were already poor and had little to their names.

On the basis of individual accounts, we can clearly see that many Mexican families considered other personal factors to leave the U.S. for Mexico, like a change in the family structure or a sense of national pride. In her interview, Emilia Castaneda de Valenciana shares that a personal tragedy, namely, the loss of her mother, shook her family to their core. Her father now had to take care of the family while being unemployed and living on welfare. When asked why her father did not apply for U.S. citizenship, she responds that his love for his home country was unwavering and that—to him—becoming an American citizen would have been the equivalent of stepping on the Mexican flag. His only recourse, partly due to his sense of national pride, was to take his family back to Mexico where he could potentially find a job in his trade and no longer depend on welfare.[49]

It was common for repatriates to have experienced economic distress during the early 1930s. Yet, at times, secondary factors, such as a sense of national pride, were decisive to make the move to leave for Mexico. Aside from the personal tragedy in Mrs. Castaneda de Valenciana's family, it is noteworthy that, for her father, American citizenship was out of the question. His personal viewpoint is reflected in the fact that the Mexican ethnic group ranked lowest with regard to becoming naturalized U.S. citizens among all major immigrant ethnic groups.[50] The reluctance of Mexican residents who were living in the U.S. legally to become naturalized citizens was seen in a negative light by Americans. However, the fact that U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were still being discriminated against only confirmed the notion that, no matter what a Mexican was doing in the U.S., discrimination would always be the norm—regardless of legal status.

There are other cases of families who decided to make the trek back to Mexico for personal reasons. In the case of Theresa Martinez Southard, she and her family of eleven moved back to Mexico not for a lack of money but, rather, due to the untimely death of her sister.[51] Mrs. Southard's family decided to leave for Mexico

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[48] Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 84-85.

[49] Emilia Castaneda de Valenciana, interview by Christine Valenciana, La Mirada, CA, September 8, 1971, Oral History (OH) 0700, transcript, Mexican American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

[50] Valdes, "Mexican Revolutionary Nationalism," 11.

[51] Theresa Martinez Southard, interview by Christine Valenciana, Los Angeles, CA, September 1, 1971, Oral History (OH) 0753, transcript, Mexican American Oral History Project, Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

because of the heartache that her sister's death caused for her father. He had a steady job as a foreman, under contract with a wealthy landowner, and was responsible for paying his crew. In her interview, Mrs. Southard shares that they departed abruptly, leaving all their possessions behind and only taking their clothes. She explains that adapting to life in Mexico was difficult, and that she always yearned for the opportunity to return to the U.S. When this opportunity presented itself in 1951, she had been living in Mexico for twenty years and already had a family of her own.[52]

Personal situation as a key reason why a family or an individual returned to Mexico should not be underestimated. In 1934, after interviewing 108 people who were repatriating back to Mexico, James Carl Gilbert found that 19 of them (or 17%) gave as their main reason a desire to be with their family, either a mother or a father. According to Gilbert, a good number of people who repatriated back to Mexico had come to the U.S. after the Mexican Revolution.[53] Gilbert's study affirms how much family was valued by those Mexicans who decided to return. While his sample study is rather small and only considers a mere 108 individuals who repatriated, its findings are confirmed by several of the oral histories cited above. As Gilbert has pointed out, the yearning for a family member was, at times, the deciding factor when it came to repatriating back to Mexico.

Conclusion

Considering that the U.S. and the world—due to the COVID-19 pandemic—may yet be facing an economic disaster comparable to the Great Depression, it is imperative to fully understand what occurred back then and how we, as a country, failed an entire ethnic group, including American citizens, by making them the scapegoat for the economic hardships shared by all. As we reflect on what occurred during the repatriation period of the Great Depression, we acknowledge that there were three key factors that led to the mass migration of Mexican repatriates: firstly, the U.S. government—through the rhetoric of its officials and their support for local authorities who were facilitating the deportation of Mexicans; secondly, the Mexican government—through its agricultural reforms intended to entice Mexican nationals to return with the promise of arable land and economic opportunity; and thirdly, much less known but clearly deserving of more attention, personal reasons—ranging from economic considerations via individual tragedies to the strong desire to reunite with family. All three factors are important to obtain an accurate picture of why and how repatriation took place.

It is well known how Mexicans were treated in the U.S. and that the Mexican government wanted them to return to Mexico. Future research might consider

[52] Southard, OH 0753, transcript.

[53] James Carl Gilbert, "A Field Study in Mexico of the Mexican Repatriation Movement" (master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1934), 25.

how those who migrated back to Mexico were treated by the locals: Were they seen as traitors or as Americanized Mexicans because they had left in the first place? It is of great concern that those in power can control and push narratives that paint individuals or entire groups as scapegoats for failures of security or economic hardships. One can only hope that those who know their history and have a sense of logic will prevail over those who spew hatred and bigotry.

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