A History of Mexican Americans in California:
REVOLUTION TO DEPRESSION: 1900-1940

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw rapid growth in the size of the California Chicano population. However, the stage for this growth had been set by years of social and economic changes in Mexico and the United States.

Development of mining and industry in northern Mexico, as well as building of north-south railroad lines, attracted large numbers of Mexicans to the northern part of the country in the late nineteenth century. There they learned new industrial, mining, and railroad skills that would be useful later in the United States. The railroad also provided a quicker and easier means of travel to the north. At the same time, economic pressures were mounting. Many small landowners were losing their holdings to expanding haciendas, while farm workers were increasingly and systematically trapped into peonage by accumulating debts.

Finally in 1910, political opponents of President Porfirio Diaz revolted. He was quickly overthrown, but replacement of his government did not end the Mexican Revolution which spread throughout the country and took on deep social and economic, rather than merely political ramifications. The resulting chaos drove thousands of Mexicans north. Beyond physical proximity, the United States offered jobs — in industry, in mines, on railroads, and in agriculture — and all at wage levels far higher than those in Mexico. World War I further increased the demand for Mexican labor.

In the 1920s, the pace of emigration increased, spurred in part by the short but violent Cristero Revolution (1926-1929), while the U.S. economy continued to expand and attract Mexican labor. Nearly one-half million Mexicans entered the United States on permanent visas during the 1920s, some 11 percent of total U.S. immigration during that decade. Thousands more entered informally, before passage of restrictive regulations. Even after establishment of more stringent immigration rules and procedures, thousands continued to cross without legal sanction. Many of them were ignorant of the required legal processes; others sought to avoid the head tax, the expense of a visa, and bureaucratic delays at the border. Coyotes — as the professional labor contractors and border-crossing experts were known — often received commissions from U.S. businesses. They began the industry of smuggling people and forging documents that continues to the present.

Most Mexican immigrants settled in the Southwest. By 1930, more than 30 percent of Mexican-born U.S. residents lived in California. They entered nearly every occupation classified as unskilled or semi-skilled. Chicanos became the bulwark of southwestern agriculture. By 1930, manufacturing, transportation, communications, and domestic and personal service had become the other major sectors of Chicano employment. Chicanos made up 75 percent of the work force of the six major western railroads. They also held blue-collar positions in construction, food processing, textiles, automobile industries, steel production, and utilities. In California during the 1920s, Chicanos constituted up to two-thirds of the work force in many industries.

A small Chicano middle class developed, often oriented toward serving the Chicano population. The growth of barrios and colonias fostered expansion of small businesses such as grocery and dry-goods stores, restaurants, barber shops, and tailor shops. Small construction firms emerged. Chicanos entered the teaching profession, usually working in private Chicano schools or in segregated public schools.

Many factors kept Chicanos in a marginal status. The geographical isolation of employment sites, particularly in railroading, agriculture, and agriculturally related industry, often reduced opportunities for Chicanos to gain familiarity with U.S. society through personal contact. Chicanos also encountered various forms of segregation. These included maintenance of separate Anglo and Mexican public schools, restrictive covenants on residential property, segregated restaurants, separate "white" and "colored" sections in theaters, and special "colored" days in segregated swimming pools. Numerous government agencies, religious groups, and private social service organizations, however, made special efforts to assist in the acculturation of Chicanos by providing instruction in the English language, U.S. culture, and job skills.

The dramatic increase in Mexican immigration affected Chicano residential patterns. Thousands settled in older barrios, causing over crowding and generating construction of cheap housing to meet the sudden demand. In some barrios, Mexican immigrants attained such numerical dominance that U.S.-born Chicanos became a minority within a minority. Immigrants sometimes formed new barrios adjacent to historical Chicano areas or new colonias in agricultural or railroad labor camps.

The growth in the size and number of Chicano communities fostered the growth of community activities. In the early twentieth century, there was a major increase in Chicano organizations, particularly *mutualistas* (mutual aid societies). Some adopted descriptive or symbolic names, such as Club Reciproco (Reciprocal Club) or Sociedad Progresista Mexicana (Mexican Progressive Society). Others selected names of Mexican heroes, such as Sociedad Mutualista Miguel Hidalgo (the father of Mexican independence), Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez (the famous Mexican Liberal president), or Sociedad Ignacio Zaragosa (the victorious Texas-born general at the Battle of Puebla, 1862).

Casa de Tableta/Buelna's Roadhouse, San Mateo County

Membership varied. Some organizations were exclusively male or female; others had mixed membership. Most developed as representative of the working class, but others were essentially middle or upper-class, or reflected a cross-section of wealth and occupations. Although each mutualista had its special goals, they all provided a focus for social life with such activities as

meetings, family gatherings, lectures, discussions, cultural presentations, and commemoration of both U.S. and Mexican holidays.

Most provided services, such as assistance to families in need, emergency loans, legal services, mediation of disputes, and medical, life, and burial insurance. Some organized libraries or operated *escuelitas* (little schools), providing training in Mexican culture, Spanish, and basic school subjects to supplement the inferior education many Chicanos felt their children received in the public schools. Mutualistas helped immigrants adapt to life in the United States. Many mutualistas became involved in civil rights issues, such as the legal defense of Chicanos and the struggle against residential, school, or public segregation and other forms of discrimination. Some engaged in political activism, including support of candidates for public office. At times, mutualistas provided support for Chicanos on strike. Coalitions of Chicano organizations were formed, such as La Liga Protectora Latina (Latin Protective League) and El Confederacion de Sociedades Mexicanas (Confederation of Mexican Societies) in Los Angeles.

In addition to mutualistas, a variety of other cultural, political, service, and social organizations were developed in the early twentieth century, as communities grew or were formed. Possibly the most turbulent Chicano organizational activity of that era was in the labor sphere, where Mexicans played ironically conflicting roles. Because of depressed wages and unemployment in Mexico, Mexican workers could earn more in the United States, even by accepting jobs at pay levels that Anglos refused. Employers thus used Mexican labor to hold down pay scales, and often reached across the border to recruit Mexicans as strikebreakers. Because of the antipathy Mexicans generated in these roles, and also because of the biases of union leaders, local chapters of U.S. labor unions often refused to accept Chicanos as members, or required them to establish segregated locals.

There were Mexican strikers as well as strikebreakers, though. Chicanos were in the forefront of agricultural strikes. In 1903, more than 1,000 Mexican and Japanese sugar-beet workers carried out a successful strike near Ventura. In 1913, Mexican workers participated in a strike against degrading conditions on the Durst hop ranch, near Wheatland, Yuba County. Although the intervention of National Guard troops and the arrest of some 100 migrant workers broke the back of the strike, the Wheatland events contributed to establishment of the California Commission on Immigration and Housing, and recognition of the oppressive living and working conditions of agricultural laborers.

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Mexicans heed or participated in a number of agricultural strikes throughout California. Mexicans struck Imperial Valley melon fields in 1928 and 1930. In 1933, El Monte strawberry fields, San Joaquin Valley cotton fields and fruit orchards, Hayward pea fields, and many other locales were affected. Strikes spread to Redlands citrus groves in 1936, and to Ventura County lemon groves in 1941. Mexicans also challenged the related food-processing industry through strikes by lettuce packers in Salinas in 1936, cannery workers in Stockton in 1937, and others.

Chicanos created a number of their own unions. El Confederacion de Uniones Obreras Mexicanas (CUOM, Confederation of Mexican Labor Unions) was formed in 1928. Among its goals were equal pay for Mexicans and Anglos doing the same job, termination of job discrimination against Chicano workers, and limitation on the immigration of Mexican workers into the United States. At its height, CUOM had about 20 locals and 3,000 workers.

In the early 1930s, Chicanos established some 40 agricultural unions in California. The largest, El Confederacion de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros

Mexicanos (CUCOM, Confederation of Mexican Farm Workers' and Laborers' Unions), created in 1933, ultimately included 50 locals and 5,000 members. Most of these unions later joined the American Federation of Labor or the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The Great Depression brought a dramatic population reversal among Mexican Americans. Tabulated immigration to the United States from Mexico fell from nearly 500,000 during the 1920s to only 32,700 during the 1930s. At the same time, official figures indicate that some half- million persons of Mexican descent moved to Mexico.

The Depression displaced millions of American workers, and the drastic midwestern drought dispossessed thousands more, many of whom headed for California. As a result, California Chicanos not only lost their jobs in the cities along with other Americans, but also found themselves displaced from agricultural jobs by Dust Bowl migrants. Whereas before the Depression Anglos had composed less than 20 percent of California migratory agricultural laborers, by 1936, they had increased to more than 85 percent.

The shrinking job market caused Anglo attitudes toward Mexicans in the United States to change. Previously welcomed as important contributors to an expanding agriculture and industry, Mexicans now were seen as "surplus labor." No longer considered the backbone of California agriculture and invaluable contributors to other employment sectors, Mexicans instead were viewed as an economic liability, and had become objects of resentment as recipients of scarce public relief funds.

The government's solution was the Repatriation Program. In cooperation with the Mexican government, which had regretted the loss of so many able workers, U.S. federal, state, county, and local officials applied pressure on Mexicans to "voluntarily" return to Mexico. At times, this procedure resulted in outright deportation. Mexican aliens who lacked documents of legal residency, including many who had entered the United States in good faith during an earlier period when immigration from Mexico was a more informal process, were particularly vulnerable. Among the victims of the process were naturalized and U.S.-born husbands, wives, and children of Mexican repatriates, who had to choose between remaining in the United States or maintaining family unity by moving to Mexico.

The Depression era also sharpened long-existent Chicano distrust of government, particularly its agents of law enforcement. During the Depression, the use of violence to break strikes and disrupt union activities was widespread and added to Chicano antagonism toward law-enforcement officials. The Repatriation Program further increased Chicano distrust of government.

La Union Espanola de Vacaville, Solano County