

INTRODUCTION

Between 1980 and 1988 the Hispanic population increased thirty-four percent, while the non-Hispanic population increased only seven percent. Numerically this means that Hispanics number 19.4 million, or 8.1 percent of the total population in the United States. Of these, fifty-five percent reside in California and Texas.¹ Predictions are that this growth, based on natural increase (that is, the number of births minus the number of deaths) and net migration from Mexico and other Hispanic countries, will continue.

This sizeable increase has drawn national attention, as educators, demographers, policymakers, economists, and political observers attempt to assess the implications and impact which this unprecedented growth will have on American society. However, even though the attention has been national in scope, the focus has largely been on southwestern Mexican Americans because they are the largest of the Hispanic groups and because the great majority of them are concentrated in that region.

The regional perspective has been reinforced by those who study and write about Mexican Americans. Despite the significant progress made by Chicano/a scholars during the past two decades in advancing new paradigms, theories and frameworks with which to understand the Chicano/a experience, much of their work has remained centered on the Southwest.² Thus, the purpose of this second volume of *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*. It is hoped that in keeping with the stated goals of this issue, titled "Mexicans in the Midwest," greater interest among researchers, policymakers and students in this important region will be

promoted. In this volume the demarcation of the Midwest is based upon geographic location and prevailing definitions of the region. It includes the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The foregoing is not to suggest that Mexican Americans and other Hispanics living outside the borderlands have been completely ignored or overlooked by scholars. As this volume on Mexicans in the Midwest suggests, the literature on midwestern Mexicans is growing. Within the last few years a cadre of scholars, building upon the pioneering works of Paul Taylor, Manuel Gamio, Anita Jones, and Julian Samora, have begun reassessing those studies, locating and identifying new primary sources of information, and developing research paradigms and frameworks.

In the first essay, Professor Dennis Valdés provides a framework for studying the history of Chicanos/as in the Midwest by examining how they fit conceptually into Chicano Studies scholarship and immigration history. In the process he delineates the differences and similarities between Midwest Chicanos/as, European immigrants and southwestern Mexicans. In part, he argues, the emphasis on social and labor history has caused broader issues in the study of Midwest Mexicans and Mexican Americans to be neglected or overlooked. The latter part of his essay provides a discussion of themes, models and periodization he believes are central to the reconceptualization of Chicano/a history in the Midwest.

It is important to note that not only does a sizeable portion of the Hispanic population reside outside the Southwest, but that many of their communities have deep and diverse roots. For example, significant numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans began working and settling in the Midwest during the early 1900s. Their incursions into the region, however, date back to the 1540s when Francisco de Coronado's band of Indians, *mestizos*, and Spaniards traversed the Great Plains in search of the Seven Cities of Cibola. That quest, which ended unsuccessfully in what is today the state of Kansas, added further to Spanish claims in the New World. In the 19th century Mexicans returned in greater numbers as guides, merchants, settlers, lawmen, *vaqueros*, and students.

INTRODUCTION

Included in the latter group were the children of prominent southwestern families who studied law, medicine and liberal arts at the University of Michigan, the University of Notre Dame and other midwestern colleges. In the early part of the 20th century, immigration into the Midwest continued. However, it differed markedly from previous migrations, not only in makeup, but in numbers and purpose. Between 1900 and 1938, the great majority of Mexicans who travelled to the Midwest were immigrant nationals who came in search of temporary work.

Mexican nationals began arriving in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri and Kansas as early as 1903. Initially, much of this migration was migration by drift, as Mexicans entered the region as track maintenance crews for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and other major rail lines. The beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and growing employment opportunities in the United States accelerated the movement of Mexicans across the border. Migration became more purposeful and directed as labor contractors in the Southwest recruited Mexicans to work in the sugar beet fields, meat packing houses and on railroads. Mexicans also set out on their own, following an ever-widening arc across the United States in search of better pay and more stable employment. Chain migration also channeled Mexicans into America's heartland as those who were already in the region sent for family members. Furthermore, news from Mexicans in the United States continually filtered back to Mexico via letters, contractors, and those who had returned home for visits. Armed with such information, emigrants increasingly set out on their own for specific locales and destinations. In some midwestern cities entire neighborhoods were populated by Mexicans from a particular community, state or region in Mexico.

The outbreak of World War I in Europe accelerated the need for American goods and also created a labor shortage, as unrestricted submarine warfare and the societal disruptions created by the war greatly curtailed immigration from the continent. To meet the demand for laborers, contractors intensified their recruitment efforts in Mexico and the Southwest. Soon, cities such as St. Louis and Kansas City joined the ranks of those American cities

which served as distribution centers for Mexican laborers. In the second article, Professor Michael Smith discusses the growth and development of the Mexican community in Kansas City between 1900 and 1920.

Although the census of 1910 showed only 335 Mexicans in the Kansas City area, that number had increased to almost three thousand by 1914. For most Mexicans life was difficult. There, as elsewhere, they encountered poor working conditions, substandard housing, overt hostility, prejudice and segregation. In order to combat the vicissitudes of life in an alien environment, the *colonia* established numerous organizations designed to meet their social, political and economic needs. The community also had a number of small businesses which catered to the needs of nationals, and boasted its own Spanish-language newspaper, *El Cosmopolita*. In describing the goals, leadership and makeup of these diverse elements within the Kansas City community, Professor Smith provides revealing insights into the internal dynamics of the Mexican colonia prior to 1920.

According to the Census Bureau there were more than two million midwestern Hispanics in 1988. Of these, approximately 801 thousand lived in Illinois, with the largest concentration being in the Chicago Metropolitan area. Since 1965, it has ranked second only to Los Angeles as the intended destination of legal immigrants from Mexico. Presently, Chicago has the third largest Mexican-descent population in the United States. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, however, are no strangers to the "Windy City." Hundreds were contracted to work in agriculture, meat packing and the railroad industry shortly after World War I began. In 1919 U.S. Steel recruited them as strikebreakers. During the 1920s the heavily industrialized region became the primary destination for Mexicans travelling to the Midwest. By 1930 there were over fifteen thousand Mexicans in the Chicago area.

The arrival of Mexicans in ever-increasing numbers in this country coincided with the re-emergence of nativistic tendencies among Americans. In part these anti-alien, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments sprang from the emotions generated by the

INTRODUCTION

war. The cancellation of war contracts and the failure to formulate and implement a demobilization plan exacerbated the high unemployment, runaway inflation, and rampant shortages which swept the country after the war. Fears about alien ideologies such as anarchism and Bolshevism were reinforced by numerous strikes and the bomb scares which occurred in early 1919. In the hysteria that followed, immigrants and outsiders became the scapegoats for pent-up fears, anger and frustration.

The Red Scare ended in 1919. However, the intolerance it spawned continued throughout most of the twenties. Nativism manifested itself in a number of ways throughout the decade, including the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, the enactment of restrictive immigration laws, and inter-ethnic violence. More often than not the conflict between ethnic groups was fueled by economic issues involving competition for jobs and wages. Inter-ethnic violence and the central role that it played in the formation of ethnic consciousness among Mexicans in the Chicago area is the theme of Arturo Rosales's article.

The fact that few midwesterners had come into direct contact with Mexicans prior to World War I did not preclude them from having stereotypic notions about them. In fact stereotypes about the lazy, primitive and violent Mexican were prevalent in the history, literature and popular culture of America. Newspapers in the United States reinforced many of these negative images by focusing upon the violent nature of the Mexican Revolution. And Hollywood movies added to the misconceptions by their unflattering depictions of Mexicans as morally lax, unscrupulous, lawless and prone to violence. These negative stereotypes, according to Rosales, exercised a profound influence on how Mexicans were treated by the legal system in the United States. He argues that even though Mexicans were no more prone to criminal or violent tendencies than other groups, they tended to receive longer and harsher sentences than other groups for similar crimes. He also believes that inter-ethnic violence and the hostile treatment by the police and courts promoted ethnic consciousness within an ostensibly divided Mexican community by underscoring the idea

that they were all outsiders. The article by Professor Rosales offers insights into the dynamics of community development and the formation of ethnic awareness among Mexican immigrants during the 1920s.

By the end of the 1920s the Mexican population in the United States had increased to such great proportions that it attracted the attention and concern of groups and organizations as diverse as Protestant missionaries, settlement house workers, sociologists, restrictionists, labor unions and government officials on both sides of the border. One agency which exhibited a keen interest and curiosity about the nature and makeup of Mexican communities in this country was the U.S. Department of Labor. In 1926 and 1927 George Edson, a Labor Department investigator fluent in Spanish, was assigned to visit and report on dozens of Mexican immigrant communities extending from New York to the Imperial Valley of California. During the Fall and Winter of 1926 and 1927, Edson surveyed Mexican settlements in the North Central region, which encompassed much of the Midwest. He estimated that there were between sixty-three thousand and eighty thousand Mexicans in the region working in the beet fields, railroads and various industries. His detailed reports, based upon interviews with employers, their staffs, recruiters, public employees, priests, teachers, laborers, Mexicans and his own observations, contain information about recruitment practices, working and living conditions and social life in the places he visited. Despite occasionally quirky comments, Edson's reports provide perceptive and valuable details about the lives of Mexicans in the Midwest and the United States. "Mexicans in the North Central States" is the fourth article, and appears here essentially unchanged from the draft report Edson wrote in the late 1920s.

With the onset of the Depression in 1929, many of the communities surveyed by Edson were either depleted or had completely disappeared. Overall estimates place the number of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who returned to Mexico voluntarily or involuntarily between 1929 and 1937 at five hundred thousand, or about one-third of those in the United States in 1930.³ In the

INTRODUCTION

Midwest, Mexicans living in the states of Illinois, Michigan and Indiana made up about 10.5 percent of the repatriates even though they only constituted 3.5 percent of the total Mexican population in the United States.⁴ Those who avoided repatriation and remained in the United States found life in this country even more difficult than before. In the Midwest, where naturalization rates of Mexicans had remained among the lowest of all immigrant groups,⁵ the Depression exercised a profound influence. Although research about the era is scant, existing studies point to some interesting theories regarding the Depression, repatriation and Mexican socialization. For example, in East Chicago the greatest majority of repatriates came from the ranks of the most recently arrived and least rooted in the community. This, in part, led to the conclusion that the low naturalization rates among Mexicans had been a contributing factor to their repatriation. There were, of course, more compelling motives and reasons behind the repatriation schemes, as evidenced by the fact that not even citizenship precluded Mexican Americans from being repatriated. Nonetheless those who remained appear to have taken the lesson to heart. Depression-era residency and citizenship requirements which had to be met in order to qualify for relief of any kind, along with other developments in the 1930s, led to the adoption of new patterns of socialization among Mexicans, writes Rosales. These patterns further accelerated the process of acculturation within the Mexican community in East Chicago.⁶ Whether this process was evident in other midwestern communities, and what impact the depression era had on Mexican communities and institutions are only a few of the questions that need to be addressed by researchers.

In 1938 an improved economy, the existence of New Deal programs and the inability of the Mexican government to support those who had returned led to a renewed migration northward. That migration was accelerated with American entry into World War II and the inauguration of the Bracero Program. The size of the Mexican population in the Midwest also increased after 1941 as they streamed into agriculture and the war industries. Yet these immigrants were different from those who had journeyed to the region prior to 1930. Whereas most of the pre-Depression im-

migrants had been Mexican nationals, those who travelled to the Midwest after 1940 were Mexican Americans from Texas and the Southwest. For the most part they were displaced workers who had been pushed out of the region by the large influx of undocumented workers and *braceros* (contract laborers imported from Mexico). The promise of higher paying jobs and more stable work were also strong incentives for relocating. Interestingly, many of the Mexican Americans who initially resettled in the Midwest came primarily from four counties in south Texas—Willacy, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Nueces. In the late forties and early fifties, they were joined by other Mexican Americans from the Southwest, Mexican nationals, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Latin Americans.

In 1941 the long and terrible depression years suddenly came to an end when Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor. Once again thousands of men and women entered the armed forces. Among them were Mexicans and Mexican Americans, eager to fight for democratic principles which had often been denied them. This sudden infusion of men and women into the military and the need to mobilize America's resources again created a labor shortage in agriculture and industry. As imported Mexican *braceros* harvested the crops and maintained the railroads, Mexican Americans moved to the cities to fill jobs in wartime industries. Among those who entered the workforce in increasing numbers were women of Mexican descent. Richard Santillán's article focuses on Mexican American women in the war industries of the Midwest. During interviews conducted by Santillán, women recalled their experiences on the job, the challenges they faced and the impact which the war had on their lives. According to Professor Santillán the war provided women with training and experience which they used in the postwar civil rights struggle, and altered traditional beliefs and practices about the role of women within the Mexican American community.

The initial migration to the Midwest was characterized by single or unattached men who had left their families in Mexico or the Southwest. Working long hours, moving frequently and lacking social outlets because of discrimination or segregationist practices,

INTRODUCTION

most of these *solos* frequented pool halls, bars or houses of ill-repute. The Revolution of 1910 added members from the *gente decente* and *gente preparada* to the migratory stream. These elites frowned upon the less socially acceptable outlets available to Mexicans. As more women and families arrived in the Midwest during the late teens and early twenties, the elites redoubled their efforts to create a social milieu and environment which presented a more positive view of their community. To promote the idea that Mexicans were a cultured and enlightened people, they sponsored literary and drama groups, lectures, and formal dances. They also joined forces with local consuls and formed *Comisiones Patrioticas*, whose function it was to plan the celebration of Mexican national holidays such as Cinco de Mayo and September 16th. Of course not all organizing activities emanated from the elites. Generally speaking, Mexicans in the Midwest formed a wide variety of organizations designed to cushion the shock of living in an alien and sometimes hostile environment. The most common were the mutual-aid societies (*mutualistas*), which were initially established to provide death and burial benefits to members. Membership in these organizations was usually open only to males over sixteen years of age. Those who joined were asked to pay an initiation fee and about twenty-five cents a month in dues. In the Midwest members were required to pledge their loyalty to Mexico and promise never to become naturalized citizens. This was in keeping with the strong anti-assimilationist stance commonplace among most midwestern Mexicans. The highly mobile nature of the population, small memberships, and the low wages earned by Mexicans minimized mutualista treasuries. One or two benefit payments often depleted their meager funds. Of greater importance to the community at-large were the numerous social events which the mutualistas organized and sponsored. These included dances, baptisms, bazaars and the celebration of Mexican national holidays. Religious groups, sports clubs, legal defense organizations, women's clubs and auxiliaries, and groups dedicated to social, political and economic reforms were also active in many communities.

The final selection attests to the large and diverse number of Mexican and Mexican American organizations in Joliet, Illinois.

Navor Rodriguez, a long-time resident of Joliet, published the chronological survey of Mexican and Mexican American organizations in his community between 1914 and 1953 in order to recognize the work and service they rendered to the people of Mexican descent over the years. His record sheds further light on the organizational activities of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Midwest.

The history, legacy and role of Hispanics in the Midwest needs to be documented and preserved. The selections in this issue demonstrate that the process is under way. However, much remains to be done, including the development of a broader, comparative perspective on immigration, issues of ethnicity, the internal dynamics of communities, class and gender, international relations and life within a capitalist society. Research about Hispanics in the Midwest and other regions will place them within a national perspective, and provide the context and background in which to assess the needs, challenges and opportunities their growing numbers are creating in the United States. Without this perspective our understanding of Hispanics will not only be limited, but inaccurate and incomplete.

The editors wish to thank the contributors to this volume for their diligence and patience, and to the staff members at the Mexican American Studies & Research Center for their assistance. Special acknowledgement is made to Natalia Ochotorena for inputting the entire manuscript and to Thomas Gelson for his editorial and technical expertise. Thanks also to Macario Saldade, Director of MASRC, whose support and confidence has made this series possible. Finally my gratitude to my dear friend and co-editor Ignacio García, who has left the Center to pursue other goals and challenges. Over the years I have relied on his guidance, expertise and good humor, and it is hard to imagine working on future issues of *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies* without him. I will miss collaborating with you on the series, carnal. Ignacio, we all wish you the best.

Juan R. García
The University of Arizona
September 1989

INTRODUCTION

NOTES

- ¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No.431, *The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 1988* (Advance Report), (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), p.1.
- ² Alex M. Saragoza, "The Significance of Recent Chicano-Related Historical Writings: An Appraisal," *Ethnic Affairs* (Number 1, Fall 1987) (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies), pp.24-62.
- ³ Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexicans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), pp.174-175.
- ⁴ Paul S. Taylor, "Mexican Labor in the United States: Migration Statistics," *University of California Publications in Economics* 12 (1934), p.48.
- ⁵ Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p.111. According to Reisler, naturalization rates among Mexicans in the United States never exceeded six percent.
- ⁶ Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana, 1919 to 1945," in *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXVII (December, 1981), pp. 333-57.