The shadow of the revolution: South Texas, the Mexican Revolution, and the evolution of modern American labor relations

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The Shadow of the Revolution: South Texas, the Mexican Revolution, and
the Evolution of Modern American Labor Relations

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
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Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation examines the creation and evolution of the agricultural economy and labor relations of South Texas from the late Nineteenth Century to the Nineteen Sixties. The changing demographic reality of Mexico, with massive population shifts northward during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, caused massive emigration to the United States once the violence of the Mexican Revolution erupted after 1910. Hundreds of thousands fled north of the border, most of them traveling to South Texas. This migration wave out of Mexico met another group of migrants traveling from the Southeast and Midwest who sought to purchase farm land in South Texas as the region underwent a transition from ranching to agriculture.

A new regime of labor and racial relations emerged from these simultaneous migrations, built on a system of social and residential segregation, continued migration from Mexico, and seasonal immobilization of workers. While this system never stopped the mobility of the Mexican and Mexican American populations of South Texas, it did allow the region to continue paying the lowest wages in the nation even as production and profits soared. Agricultural interests in the rest of the country were not long in taking notice, and began recruiting workers from South Texas by the thousands during the Nineteen Twenties after immigration from Europe had slowed down following the passage of restrictive immigration legislation in 1917, 1921, and 1924.

The South Texas model of labor relations then went national during the era of the Bracero Program from 1942-1964. Originally meant to be an emergency contract labor program between the United and Mexico during World War II, it morphed into a method by which growers could replicate the labor market conditions of South Texas, with basic rights of choice, mobility, and citizenship disregarded in favor of cheap and easily exploitable foreign labor.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, in other words, South Texas has not been a peripheral, backward region with little importance for the rest of the nation. Instead, the rest of the nation has followed in the footsteps of South Texas.
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How can I possibly sum up all of the debts that I have accumulated over the last several years in my often-bumbling efforts to finish graduate school?

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Likewise, Judy Ewell read through a few drafts of this dissertation and has been unfailing in her encouragement throughout my graduate school career. Andy Fisher provided very helpful comments on this study, and was a never-ending source of much-needed sarcasm. Ben Johnson of Southern Methodist University has provided invaluable advice as I begin the process of developing a book manuscript.

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Finally, and most importantly, I have to thank my parents, John and Connie Weber. I cannot even begin to thank you for your unending support. I just wish I had more to offer each of you as a token of my appreciation than a four-hundred page dissertation.
The Shadow of the Revolution
Introduction

“Texas history is a mixture of selected fact and generalized myth.” Rodolfo Acuña¹

The year 1968 produced what many believed was a worldwide crisis of order. Protesters, rioters, soldiers, and tanks filled the streets of Washington DC, Chicago, Paris, Prague, Mexico City, and dozens of other cities around the world. In response to this situation the leaders of the city of San Antonio, Texas, did what they do best. They threw a party.

Envisioned as a celebration of the commonalities of the nations of the Western Hemisphere, San Antonio’s World’s Fair, dubbed HemisFair, opened on April 6, 1968. Ninety acres of previously residential land on the southern edge of downtown were used to construct the ultra-modern fairgrounds in a celebration of both the “confluence of civilizations in the Americas” (the fair’s official slogan) and the economic possibilities of San Antonio and South Texas. The year 1968 was chosen for the fair because it was the 250th anniversary of the founding of San Antonio by the Spanish. More than just a birthday party, however, HemisFair was a “vivid recognition of the growth potential of a particular region and its peoples.”² Moreover, fair organizers claimed that “San Antonio lays claim to a lustrous heritage spun from the colorful threads of many cultures. On that foundation, HemisFair 68, in the truest sense, is the outcome of visionary, 20th Century pioneering.”³ On opening day, April 6, the San Antonio Express-News happily stated, “With the flags of many nations whipping in the breeze, San

³ Ibid.
Antonians and people of the nation and the world poured into what was once a haven for winos, stray dogs and junked cars,” where now “[m]oney flowed like water.”

The timing of such civic and regional boosterism was unfortunate, however. Two days before the fair opened Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed, setting off a wave of urban rebellions across the nation. Coming immediately on the heels of MLK’s assassination, with inner cities across the nation still smoldering, HemisFair advertised San Antonio as a place of ethnic and cultural confluence, a city that embodied social peace. According to the Official Souvenir Guide, the fair “intended to demonstrate the actual life-giving process of cultural confluence. It sought to show how diverse threads had been woven into a strong, new social fabric.” Thus, HemisFair sold itself as a place where diversity was celebrated, with San Antonio as the living example of peaceful cultural confluence in a time when such peace seemed quite rare.

Much was made of San Antonio’s Spanish heritage by the fair’s organizers. “In a Europe that was beginning to question the feudal system and seeking new ways of life, Spain took the lead as a Modernist,” according to an article on the Spanish Pavilion in an 80-page insert on the fair in the San Antonio Express-News. “The discovery and civilization of the New World were, therefore, the necessary consequence of an historical situation in which Spain was the only nation capable of carrying out this task, from a technical, political and

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4 “Big Daddy of All Fiestas is a Gusher,” San Antonio Express-News (April 7, 1968).
cultural point of view. In this way, the Spanish conquest and the founding of San Antonio were depicted as necessary steps in the advancement of civilization as inherited from Europe. This version of history, in addition to its curious portrayal of Spain as the leader of a modernizing Europe, left out many intermediate steps between Spanish conquistadors and modern San Antonio. Most notably, Mexico was entirely absent. The commemorative insert included only one short article on Mexico, entitled "Mariachi Music Will Lure You to Mexican Pavilion." While Spain was depicted as an integral part of the heritage of San Antonio and Texas, Mexico was little more than a scenic and quaint neighbor with little historical or cultural connection to the dominant white civilization of Texas. Never mind Texas’ years as a Mexican state, or the fact that the majority of the population of South Texas was Chicano – the Spanish heritage made a much more convenient linear historical narrative in which a civilized Spain gave way to the United States with no major complications in between.

HemisFair advertised Texas by supplementing older Texan mythological traditions with a limited type of multicultural tokenism that legitimized the contemporary political and social order. Gone were the overtly racist depictions of the past that had so dominated the popular and academic history of the state.

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8 The ultimate example of this older historiography is Walter Prescott Webb, The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1935). Webb famously wrote, "Without disparagement it may be said that there is a cruel streak in the Mexican nature, or so the history of Texas would lead one to believe. This cruelty may be a heritage from the Spanish of the Inquisition; it may, and doubtless should, be attributed partly to the Indian blood. Among the common class, ignorance and superstition prevail, making the rabble susceptible to the evil influence of designing leaders. Whatever the reasons, the government of Mexico has ever been unstable, frequently overturned by civil war, and changed but seldom improved by revolution. . . .
These images were replaced by bland affirmations of frontier cultural interaction in the borderlands of San Antonio and South Texas. Rather than symbolizing a substantive change in which Mexican Americans were welcomed as equal partners, however, these public pronouncements of cultural confluence veered toward the romantic image of the "noble savage" with Mexicans playing the part of savages.9 By 1968, according to HemisFair’s organizers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were little more than quaint remnants of a supposedly dying culture, picturesque but ultimately impotent and unimportant. Meanwhile, Anglos paraded through old Spanish missions and helped themselves to healthy doses of Mexican food while listening to mariachi music. This theme-park exoticism was the essence of the "confluence of civilizations" and cultures for HemisFair’s organizers.

No mention was made, for instance, of San Antonio’s former mayor, Juan Seguin, forced to flee the city in the 1850s after death threats against his family by newcomer Anglos. From his forced exile he wrote, "San Antonio claimed then, as it claims now, to be the first city of Texas; it was also the receptacle of the scum of society. My political and social situation brought me into continual contact with that class of people. At every hour of the day and night, my countrymen ran to me for protection against the assaults or exactions of these

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adventurers." Nor were the visitors to HemisFair told of the sprawling slum just west of the fairgrounds where they could actually see the majority of the city's Mexican and Mexican American population. Instead, the fair remained a self-contained fantasy universe that selectively depicted the history of the region as an exotic variant on the larger American pattern, with the Spanish mission standing in as a metonymic architectural and institutional presence that precluded any substantive examination of the continued Mexican and Mexican American presence in the region.

San Antonio may have represented a confluence of civilizations to the leaders of HemisFair, but it was a confluence on their terms that did more to legitimize their own social standing, as a sort of evolutionary certainty, than it did to expand the narrow narrative of Texas history or provide a truthful survey of cultural contact and integration in the region north of the Rio Grande. Without a usable past to draw from, a fantasy heritage had to be created. HemisFair became the living embodiment of this fantasy heritage, where the history of South Texas was commodified and repackaged as a cheerful justification for the political dominance of conservative elites.

This dissertation seeks to look beyond this tendentious historical heritage of mythology and Lone Star bluster and examine the real "confluence of civilizations" that created South Texas. It analyzes the development of the system of labor and racial relations that came together in the fields and towns of South Texas from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, as Mexican and Anglo

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migrants fashioned an agro-empire out of the scrub and desert. While a number of historians have examined aspects of migration, the borderlands, and labor during the Twentieth Century, they have tended to compartmentalize the different facets of this history along chronological and methodological lines.\textsuperscript{11} This study

\textsuperscript{11}In the past twenty years a number of historical studies have directly challenged the traditional depiction of the history of the Texas-Mexico border region. Even a quick glance through the footnotes will reveal the importance of all of the works listed below for this study.

There have been a number of recent studies of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century South Texas. Each does an excellent job of illuminating the larger trends at work within the region during these tumultuous years, but they fail to examine the importance of these changes for later decades. They examine the immediate effects of Porfirian era development, the entry of the railroad in South Texas, and the Mexican Revolution, but do not examine the importance of these events for the years that followed. See Benjamin Heber Johnson, Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Andres Tijerina, Tejano Empire: Life on the South Texas Ranchos (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998); and Elliott Young, Catarino Garza’s Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Johnson’s study ends in the 1930s and fails to confront issues like immigration restriction or labor relations. Tijerina’s study provides a fascinating snapshot of relations in rural South Texas, but does little to establish the importance of these experiences for the future of the region. Young examines the short-lived Catarino Garza rebellion and its effects on the transition from inclusive borderland to divided border region, but fails to carry the story into the Twentieth Century when both Mexico and the United States completed their consolidation of control over the border region.

Likewise, there is a growing historiography focused on the Texas-Mexico border region in the mid-Twentieth Century, but these studies have also tended to focus on a brief time period without examining the forces that built the region or the longer-term effects of these changes. See Richard A. Garcia, Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991); and Zaragoza Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Garcia and Vargas both focus on the Depression era, but do little to connect their studies with the developments of the 1910s and 1920s. Nor do they examine the importance of the Depression-era repatriation efforts for the legal standing of Mexican and Mexican American citizenship and labor rights within the United States in the years after World War II.

There are two important studies that examine this history over a longer period, but both tend to isolate Texas and ignore the overwhelming importance of migration in and out of the region for the shaping of Texas history: Neil Foley, The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans. They focus on issues of racial identity and political power, but do not expand their analysis any further than that. The interstate migrant stream, immigration restriction, and a number of other essential factors in understanding the history of South Texas are left out. This neglect obscures the essential linkages between Texas and the world around it.

examines the history of the Texas-Mexico border region over a longer period and
disentangles the interrelated nature of migration flows, labor conditions,
economic growth, and political change. It reveals the ways in which the Texas-
Mexico border region emerged in the early Twentieth Century from geographic
and economic isolation. The social and political changes that arose in South
Texas were driven by Mexican economic development and later by Mexico’s
revolution. Change, in other words, first came to Texas from south of the border.

Migrants—both Anglo and Mexican—were key to the making of South
Texas. Despite its peripheral location and the seemingly unquenchable Texan
desire to proclaim Lone Star exceptionalism, economic and social change entered
the sprawling region between the Rio Grande and San Antonio from without.¹²
Migrants leaving war-torn revolutionary Mexico and emergent capitalists leaving
the crowded farming areas of the Midwest and Southeast transformed South
Texas agriculture. This was the real “confluence of civilizations” that built South
Texas and San Antonio along with it. During the first half of the twentieth
century, these migrants helped build a thriving agricultural economy that relied on
the introduction of outside capital and the availability of migrant workers coming
across the border from Mexico. Yet this was not a confluence based on harmony
and equality, despite the fevered imaginings of HemisFair’s organizers.
Employed by Anglo farmers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans found
themselves relegated to the bottom of this emerging order, welcomed across the

¹² See David Weber, “Refighting the Alamo: Mythmaking and the Texas Revolution,” in Myth
and the History of the Hispanic Southwest (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988),
133-151.
international boundary to be exploited for their labor but excluded politically and socially. What emerged was a social, political, and economic arrangement built on a cross-border caste system.

These changes have had profound effects on the nation as a whole. The lessons learned by the growers of South Texas were not isolated to the border region. Their effects migrated across the country just as Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers did in the decades after the Mexican Revolution. Rather than a social and political backwater (a sort of Southwestern version of Mississippi), South Texas became an important model for agricultural interests throughout the nation. The migrant labor stream based in South Texas grew throughout the nation as Mexicans and Mexican Americans sought better opportunities, which helped recreate the racially-segmented workforce on farms far removed from the border. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, regardless of their country of birth, were consistently depicted and treated as an alien presence within the United States that lacked the ability to join the dominant society. Their resulting lack of citizenship rights recommended them to employers across the nation.

They represented the ideal labor supply for agriculturalists. They were highly mobile and available for seasonal employment, but were often stripped of their basic employment rights because of their racially subordinate position and inability to exercise the privileges of citizenship. As such, the importance of the development of a South Texas model of labor relations extended beyond the fields of the Southwest and has directly affected the development of an increasingly
globalized model of labor relations. As the farms of South Texas continued to
grow, they relied more and more on labor from Mexico. The growers in the rest
of the United States followed suit and increasingly drew their labor from Mexico
and other foreign sources as a means to ensure a surplus labor supply and low
wages. In the race to the bottom among farming interests, the growers of South
Texas led the way.

The first chapter, “Porfirian South Texas,” covers the demographic and
economic changes that swept over the U.S. Southwest and Mexican North in the
last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. Massive economic and demographic
upheaval disturbed previously isolated regions of both countries as lands on each
side of the border were pulled more closely toward central government control at
the same time that cross-border ties grew in importance. Chapter 2, “Revolución
en la Frontera,” deals with the Mexican Revolution and its immediate
consequences for the border region, focusing especially on the outbreak of race
war in South Texas in the aftermath of the discovery of the irredentist Plan De
San Diego. The near-apocalyptic violence helped accelerate the previously
gradual transfer of political and economic control from traditional elites and
smallholders to newcomer farm interests.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the effects of the demographic and economic
changes caused by the Porfirian and revolutionary periods in Mexico during the
1910s and 1920s. The focus for Chapter 3, “The Revolution in Texas:
International Migration, Capitalist Agriculture, and the Growth of the Tejano
Diaspora,” is the birth of commercial agriculture in South Texas during the 1910s
and 1920s as improved transportation and irrigation facilities combined with the massive numbers of migrants leaving the violence and disorder of revolutionary Mexico to create an agricultural boom in the previously desolate ranching region. Chapter 4, "Securing the Revolution: Political Restructuring and the Attempted Immobilization of Labor in South Texas," examines the political and social consequences of this new agricultural regime. Newcomer farmers dismantled older political structures and established a strictly segregated social and political environment, culminating in efforts to immobilize the surplus labor pool within South Texas. Through these separate strands, agricultural and political interests created the South Texas model of labor relations, whereby farming interests guaranteed themselves cheap and plentiful labor through a varied regime of labor controls and a reliance on continuous influxes of workers from Mexico. Chapter 5, "Nativism, Nationalism, and the Evolution of Immigration/Emigration Policy on Both Sides of the Rio Grande," focuses on the ways in which the increased militarization of the border and debates over immigration policies in both the United States and Mexico helped strengthen this form of labor relations during the 1910s and 1920s.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 move the analysis to the Great Depression. Chapter 6, "The Politics of Depression in South Texas," illustrates the conditions of the Great Depression in South Texas and the failure of local and state governments to deal with the worst consequences of the international economic crisis. Public aid remained almost nonexistent, but when it did come, local and state politicians wielded relief policies as the latest in a long line of laws meant to tilt the power in
labor relations further away from workers. Chapter 7, "Deportation and Repatriation from South Texas," examines the exodus of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Texas during the Great Depression, which helped to further cement the status of Mexican and Mexican American workers as a group unable to exercise any notion of labor rights. Despite the unsteady economic and social situation, however, Mexican and Mexican American workers in South Texas still launched a series of militant struggles to achieve their basic rights, providing the focus for Chapter 8, "Organization and Rebellion in Depression-Era South Texas."

Finally, Chapter 9, "Texas is Everywhere South of the Canadian Border: The Bracero Program and the Nationalization of South Texas Labor Relations," argues that the bracero program, begun as an international agreement between the US and Mexico to fill agricultural labor shortages during World War II, served as a way for agricultural interests in the rest of the nation to recreate the labor supply conditions enjoyed by the growers of South Texas. As a result, the bracero program served as a way to mobilize large numbers of foreign workers, stripped of their basic rights of choice and mobility, for use all over the country. The fact that Texas and California served as the primary users of bracero labor only revealed the level of fidelity to the South Texas model of labor relations the program exhibited.

This study examines the history of South Texas that remained unmentioned and intentionally ignored by HemisFair and its promoters. It is the phase between Spanish conquest and the present day that they deemed important
only in its exoticism. It provides little cause for triumphalism, but it does illuminate a larger importance for South Texas and the social system that developed there during the first few decades of the Twentieth Century.
On January 15, 1876, General Fidencio Hernández made a pronunciamiento against the government of Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada. He declared the beginning of the Revolution of Tuxtepec under the leadership of General Porfirio Díaz. Díaz was then in exile in Brownsville, Texas, across the Rio Grande from Matamoros, Tamaulipas.¹ This was merely the latest in a long series of unsuccessful coup attempts by Díaz, stretching back to the late 1860s.²

Díaz’s verbal crossing of the Rio Grande set off a chain of events that, over the following three decades, drastically altered the demographic realities of Mexico. By bringing political stability and economic growth to the nation after decades of periodic warfare and political volatility, Díaz helped usher in rapid capitalist modernization. Railroads connected the far-flung northern and southern territories to the older central regions of Mexico, bringing increased capitalization in their wake. The increased availability of capital allowed for the expansion of the internal market, while also opening large swaths of previously isolated land to agricultural production for domestic and international markets. As a result, the years after Díaz took control of Mexico witnessed a marked population shift toward previously desolate areas of the north and away from the more crowded central plateau.

¹ For a letter from Porfirio Díaz while in exile briefly explaining his opposition to the government of Lerdo de Tejada, see Porfirio Díaz to Manuel Gonzalez, Fondo CXC, Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico Condumex, Mexico, D.F.
These same forces came to bear on South Texas during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The entry of railroads and increased capitalization transformed a previously isolated region that remained largely outside of the purview of the federal government in Washington and unattached to the domestic market of the United States into an important agricultural region tied into the volatile international market economy.

The timing of these changes north and south of the Rio Grande was not coincidental. They represent a process that began in the central plateau of Mexico and worked its way north. Even though an international boundary separated South Texas from Northern Mexico, the changes that occurred in South Texas during the last quarter of the nineteenth century followed from the economic and demographic changes occurring south of the border. The same forces unleashed by Díaz that brought modernization to Mexico dragged South Texas into the international market.

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Mexico had seen only temporary respite from turmoil in the decades before 1876. After a brutal civil war in which the Liberals under Benito Juárez defeated the Conservatives, an invading army from France deposed the Liberals in 1861 and ruled Mexico for six years thanks to Conservative collaboration. The execution of Emperor Maximilian brought the end of the French Intervention in 1867 and ushered in the Restored Republic. The next few years brought some semblance of stability to the nation as a whole, but also witnessed the extension of modernization efforts that began during the first Liberal reign in the 1850s that
fell heavily on the peasant majority of rural Mexico. As historian Friedrich Katz has written, the Liberals “envisaged the replacement of what they considered the unsteady pillars of the old order – the church, the army, the regional caciques, the communal villages – with a ‘modern foundation.’” In spite of their high-minded ideals, their efforts to reform communal landholding patterns did not create an agricultural middle class, as they hoped, but led instead to rapid consolidation of landholding in the hands of large hacendados. Thus, these early attempts at land reform created more tension in the countryside and accelerated the dispossession of many rural Mexicans. Yet the central government in Mexico City still exercised slight influence in much of Mexico’s sprawling national territory. Much of the south remained unknown to officials in the Distrito Federal, while the arid north had only the most tenuous ties to the central government. Banditry remained endemic across much of the country, making commerce and travel dangerous.

The governments of Benito Juárez and Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada (who was elected president over Porfirio Díaz upon Juárez’s death in 1871) tried to deal with these problems, but were never able to achieve any lasting stability. The creation of the famed Rurales police force helped limit some of the more overt signs of violence and banditry, largely by converting some of the best-known bandits into Rurales, but was not able to solve the endemic violence of the Mexican countryside during the years of the Restored Republic. These issues of

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4 The Rurales have become synonymous with the Díaz regime, but they were in fact created during the Juárez presidency. The Rurales did become much more prominent during the
stability were exacerbated by the slow disintegration of the Liberal coalition after the end of the French Intervention, as the elite and middle class wing of the party moved further away from the more radical popular sector of the population.

Juárez and Lerdo angered the popular sector with their land reform efforts, but were not much more successful in their efforts to appease the elite by bringing economic growth to Mexico. Mexico badly needed additional capital to create an infrastructure that would allow for the growth of large-scale mining, industry, and commercial agriculture, but the continuing instability in Mexico limited the availability of outside investment.

The death of Juárez eliminated much of the popular support still enjoyed by the Liberals, though Díaz was unable to defeat Lerdo in the election of 1871 or by means of a coup in 1872. Díaz again ran for the presidency against Lerdo in 1875, was again defeated, and once again was unable to nullify the election by means of a coup. Still, the Lerdo regime was on shaky ground by the mid-1870s. Not only, as Friedrich Katz has noted, did Lerdo lack the prestige that Juárez had built up during his years of leadership during the Reform Wars and the French Intervention, but, as a criollo, he did not appeal to indigenous Mexico in the same way that Juárez, a Zapotec from Oaxaca, had. In addition, Lerdo had begun to anger investors from the United States by attempting to limit the amount of investment entering Mexico from the United States. Railroad interests in New

Porfiriato, however, helping Díaz to consolidate his control over the nation by acting, in Vanderwood’s words, as “peacekeepers, but, much more important for the dictator, they were his means for political centralization, and they represented his determination to have his will obeyed. They also assured national security for capitalistic investors and became the showpiece of a modernized Mexico.” Paul J. Vanderwood, Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 104.

Katz, “Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato,” 64.
York and ranching interests in Texas viewed Lerdo's hostility as dangerously obstructionist and made it known that they would not be opposed to regime change in Mexico City. The Texas interests were also quite eager to have Mexico deal with issues of border violence from their side of the Rio Grande, and they believed that Lerdo was unsuited for the task. Díaz, on the other hand, seemed just the man for the job.  

These Americans were well aware of Díaz and his strong belief in the need for both pacification of the Mexican countryside and economic modernization. For his part, Díaz actively sought this support while he was in exile in Texas after his last unsuccessful coup attempt. He was in contact with economic, political, and military leaders in the United States and promised to make Mexico a more hospitable place for foreign investment when he took power. He also promised Texans that he would move immediately to crack down on violence along the Rio Grande. Thus, with the blessing of interests within the US, Díaz moved again to overthrow the Lerdo regime in January 1876.

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7 Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 63-66. South Texas interests were especially interested in having Juan Cortina eliminated by Díaz. Cortina had remained a thorn in the side of South Texas landowners since 1859 when he led a spontaneous revolt in Brownsville that was part family feud, part racial vengeance, and part political challenge to Anglo elites. The 1859 rebellion was triggered when Cortina witnessed the Brownsville town marshal pistol-whipping a Mexican American man who had worked on a Cortina family ranch. When Cortina tried to stop the beating, the marshal insulted him, so Cortina shot the officer and rode off with the injured Mexican American man. What followed was a war along the border between Cortina's forces and the state militia that lasted a few months, then died out after Cortina moved across the border and settled in Matamoros. He would remain in the northern state of Tamaulipas for the next two decades, even assuming the governorship briefly. It is clear that he ran a cattle-theft ring in northern Mexico, though Cortina was in good company as Anglo elites in South Texas such as Richard King, James Stillman, Richard Kleberg, Lon Hill, and an almost endless list of others were likewise employed. Still, Cortina's continued presence south of the border became a symbol of the instability of Mexico, and the continued raids that ventured north of the Rio Grande were seen as the number one priority for stabilizing the Texas-Mexico border region. When Díaz took control in 1876, he immediately had Cortina taken into custody and placed under house arrest in
The Plan of Tuxtepec declared the need for Mexicans to rise up against the reelection of Lerdo de Tejada, which Díaz called the first step toward tyranny. Díaz had made similar pronouncements before his previous unsuccessful coups, but this time he extended the logic of anti-reelectionism down to the municipal level, and thus was able to rally many throughout the nation to his side with what appeared to be a promise of more local democracy.\(^8\) Also essential to this victory, which began with an invasion of Mexico from north of the Rio Grande, was the refusal of the military commander in South Texas, General Edward Ortho Cresap (E.O.C.) Ord, to comply with orders to enforce neutrality laws. Ord was a friend of Richard King, one of Díaz’s largest supporters in South Texas. He justified his failure to stop Díaz from using Texas as a staging ground for an invasion of Mexico by arguing that it would “violate the civil liberties of Mexicans,” even though Ord and his troops had earned a reputation in the previous years for raiding across the international boundary at will and killing a number of “suspicious-looking” Mexicans on the both sides of the Rio Grande.\(^9\) Thus, Mexico City, far away from his base of operations along the Rio Grande. He remained there until his death in 1892. It is interesting to note that news of the Cortina War reached the rest of the state and country shortly after the raid on Harper’s Ferry, and many in South Texas believed that Cortina’s efforts were every bit as dangerous as those of John Brown in Virginia. See Jerry D. Thompson, ed., Juan Cortina and the Texas-Mexico Frontier, 1859-1877 (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1994).

\(^8\) Further, as historian John Tutino has argued, while Díaz never promised any sort of agrarian reform, his calls for local autonomy could easily have been mistaken for a more thoroughgoing reformism. Additionally, as Tutino asked rhetorically, “was he not in revolt against Sebastian Lerdo and the liberal faction most identified with the privatization of village lands?” John Tutino, From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750-1940 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 268.

\(^9\) Hart, Empire and Revolution, 66-67. Ironically, shortly thereafter, Ord was commanded by President Hayes to pursue any lawbreakers across the Rio Grande without seeking Mexico’s permission. Díaz reacted to this threat to Mexico’s sovereignty by stationing troops along the river with orders to attack any troops that tried to cross over from the United States. This situation could very well have led to war between the nations had both sides not backed off by 1878 after Hayes finally recognized Díaz as the legitimate ruler of Mexico. Katz, “Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato,” 68-69. It is also useful to note that officials were much quicker in responding to
political disaffection in Mexico combined with connivance of a U.S. military official to allow Díaz to topple the Lerdo regime.

Contrary to much of the post-revolutionary nationalist historiography of Mexico, Díaz’s policies were not a drastic departure from the Liberal regimes of Juárez and Lerdo de Tejada. The Porfiriato was very much a continuation of the policies and ideology of the Liberal governments that preceded it. These similarities are most obvious in Díaz’s land policy, which remained the same as the Juarista and Lerdista policies. All three stressed the elimination of communal lands in an effort to create a new form of highly-capitalized agriculture in the Mexican countryside.

But there were also a few important differences between the regimes. First, the Porfirian regime dealt far more harshly with any signs of disorder, and was rapidly able to bring a semblance of order to Mexico. Second, Díaz and his advisors allowed unprecedented levels of foreign investment into Mexico in an attempt to rapidly modernize the newly stabilized nation. Díaz, then, did not try to alter the course that had been laid by Juárez and Lerdo, but instead sought to augment their liberal reforms with a healthy dose of political centralization and military coercion.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) For an interesting examination of the elite ideology that served as the basis of the Porfirián regime, see William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirián Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

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violations of the neutrality laws by adherents of Lerdo who were gathering and plotting in the vicinity of El Paso. Conditions in the El Paso region were further complicated by the outbreak of the Salt War, in which a small-scale race war broke out between Anglos and Mexicans in which the Texas Rangers played a prominent role. For an examination of these events that is sympathetic to the Rangers, see Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192-206.
The Díaz regime as it evolved in the years from 1876 to 1910 was built on, in the words of Friedrich Katz, "two processes: the achievement of internal stability (the Pax Porfiriana) and the emergence of an effective and powerful Mexican state. These developments in turn were inextricably linked to the economic development of the country" which was driven by the massive increase in foreign investment that came with the first signs of stability under Díaz. The backbone of this effort to consolidate the Porfirián regime and modernize the Mexican economy was the expansion of Mexico's railroad network, which consisted of little more than a run-down line that linked Mexico City to Veracruz when Díaz took power. In the years after Díaz took control of the government foreign investment flooded into the nation to help construct a modern transportation system.

The entry of rail networks into previously isolated areas of Mexico, especially the arid north, had a number of important effects. Political integration and consolidation was greatly aided by the new transportation network.

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11 Katz, "Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato," 81. Díaz was not technically in control from 1880-1884, when he stepped down and allowed Manuel Gonzalez to assume the presidency, not wishing to make a mockery of his espousal of non-reelectionism a few years after he campaigned against Lerdo for that reason. This moral dilemma no longer seemed to bother him after 1884, as Díaz had himself reelected every election cycle until he was forced out of power by the Revolution in 1911.

12 It is important to note that these changes were similar, if not identical, to the changes that occurred throughout the Southwestern United States during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the railroads reached these isolated areas. Market access and increased capitalization led to higher land values, creating a lucrative new capacity for capitalist agriculture for some, while others were forced off of their land by a combination of economic and legal factors. Thus, the dispossession of land in Central Mexico and the displacement of these campesinos was caused by the same mechanisms which helped create the Farmers' Alliance and that forced sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and small landowners off of their land in areas like Central Texas in the late nineteenth century. See Neil Foley, The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Another recent study shows further parallels in southern Brazil with the entry of railroads into the Contestado region in the 1910s: Todd A. Diacon, Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality: Brazil's Contestado Rebellion, 1912-1916 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
network. With easier access to even the most isolated parts of the national
territory, Díaz was able to rein in the political power of regional caciques in
Guerrero, Jalisco, Sinaloa, Coahuila, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León, among
others. The implementation of central power was not necessarily achieved
through coercion, though such means were used in some areas. More
emblematic of the Porfirian system and the fragile Pax Porfiriana is the northern
state of Chihuahua, which was ruled as a virtual fiefdom of the Terrazas-Creel
family until 1884, when Díaz had the family removed from political power.
Instead of declaring against the Díaz regime, the Terrazas-Creel clan did their best
to take advantage of the economic modernization that Díaz brought to the

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13 See the essays in Thomas Benjamin and William McNellie, eds., Other Mexicos: Essays on
Regional Mexican History, 1876-1911 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984),
especially Thomas Benjamin, “Introduction: Approaching the Porfiriato,” 3-25; Mark Wasserman,
“Chihuahua: Family Power, Foreign Enterprise, and National Control,” 33-54; William Stanley
Langston, “Coahuila: Centralization against State Autonomy,” 55-76; and William K. Meyers,
14 For a more in-depth study of the Porfirian political consolidation on the local level, see Romana
Falcon, “Force and the Search for Consent: The Role of the Jefaturas Politicas of Coahuila in
National State Formation,” in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., Everyday Forms of
State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico (Durham: Duke
University Press, 1994), 107-134. Falcon described the role of the local jefes politicos in the
northern state of Coahuila in helping to bring about both the consolidation and dissolution of
centralized control during the Porfiriato. By building up local and regional political machines, the
institution of the jefatura politica helped bring the entire national territory under the authority of
Mexico City, but the often arbitrary and corrupt nature of many of these local machines also
helped tear the regime apart in the early twentieth century. Falcon also noted an ambiguity at the
heart of this system: “By law, and often in real life, the jefaturas were the essential instrument of
the governor and the president for imposing the state’s presence and control on its regions, towns,
and villages. But at other times they did just the opposite: as zealous champions of regional elites
or community interests, they acted as bulwarks of local autonomy against state or national efforts
to concentrate authority.” Falcon, 127. The similarity between these political structures and the
political machines that dominated the politics of South Texas from the late nineteenth century and
into the twentieth century is striking, as both served the dual purposes of consolidating central
control through their often arbitrary powers of social regulation at the same time that they acted as
sites of articulation between different classes. Falcon’s study points toward further similarities
when she quoted an opposition newspaper that accused the jefe politico of the town of Sierra
Mojada of using prisoners as laborers to build a water tank at his house in 1893, which bears a
striking resemblance to actions taken by, among others, the Parr family in Duval County in South
Press, 1995); Falcon, 118.
Mexican North, temporarily abandoning their political primacy in the state while consolidating their economic power. In many ways, this situation provides the perfect symbol for the Díaz regime and its relation to the Mexican upper class, where political power was surrendered to the central government in favor of increased economic opportunity and stability.

Increased economic opportunity was another one of the important effects of the expansion of the Mexican railroad network. In one way, market access and capitalization of the Mexican countryside allowed for the expansion of capitalist agriculture into areas of the nation that had never been commercially feasible before the Porfiriato. The railroads may have been built by foreign capital, but they gave landowners and capitalists in Mexico the chance to compete within a growing internal market. Thus, the Mexican internal market expanded drastically, as more currency now circulated even in the most isolated areas of the

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15 The Terrazas-Cree! family regained the governorship in 1903 in one of Díaz's many efforts to play state elites against each other to increase reliance of the periphery on the central government in Mexico City. In fact, as a number of historians have pointed out, this calculated juggling of elite interests by Díaz was both a strength and weakness of the Díaz regime. See, for instance, Gilbert M. Joseph and Allen Wells, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatan, 1876-1915* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848-1910* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001). In one way, the fact that Díaz threw his support between rival elite groups made the ruling elites in each state beholden to him. On the other hand, however, this seemingly arbitrary system of political patronage had the potential for instability, especially in the later years of the Porfiriato. The same sort of balancing act occurred within the central administration, with Díaz constantly playing his military advisors against the group of modernizing technocrats known as the Científicos. Historian William Stanley Langston linked these two Porfirista policies when he argued, "Díaz encouraged competition among the camarillas as a control mechanism. He always attempted to tie camarilla leaders to the regime, to prevent the development of independent political groups. The camarillas' linkage to warring factions in the national administration accentuated the impartial pose which Díaz assumed, and facilitated his divide-and-conquer strategy." William Stanley Langston, "Coahuila: Centralization against State Autonomy," 71. While this system of divide-and-conquer worked quite well for years, it collapsed under its own weight in the early twentieth century as the economic stability that undergirded the Pax Porfiriana disappeared.

country. But, as happened at the same time in the US West with the expansion of the railroad network, this increased capitalization brought a number of complications with it.

Rising land values and the introduction of massive amounts of foreign capital in the Mexican countryside led to an acceleration of land dispossession for many rural Mexicans, especially in the densely populated central regions, and the consolidation of landholdings. As John Hart has described, the railroads’ ability to bring isolated areas into contact with the world market “caused agricultural, livestock, timber, and mining land values to skyrocket and brought about a transformation of the land tenure system through foreclosures and seizures that resulted. For the eighty-seven percent of the people who lived in the countryside, the opening up of their communities to the outside world meant a dramatic change in life-style and in their way of earning a living. For the campesinos, that sixty-two percent of the population that worked the land, it meant economic disenfranchisement, social dislocation, and violence.”

This turmoil first emerged during the planning stages of the railroad network, when the seizure of lands meant for track construction caused localized uprisings among campesinos throughout the nation. This dispossession and violence continued throughout the Porfiriato, as the legal assaults on communal landholding that had begun during the Juárez regime were extended during the Díaz regime, boosted by foreign investment and the possibility of massive profits.

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18 Ibid., 41.
for hacienda owners. As a result, by 1910 almost 90 percent of Mexico’s rural population was landless and tied to hacendados through wage labor or debt peonage. The result of these trends was growing poverty and disaffection among the rural population that festered for decades before it finally exploded in the Mexican Revolution in 1910.

These systemic changes in the nature of land tenure also caused enormous demographic changes, as many began to leave the crowded central rural regions for cities and the rapidly developing northern states. During the Porfiriato, according to Friedrich Katz, the entry of railroads, “illustrated in the most palpable way possible that what had once been a frontier was being transformed into ‘the border’ and what had once been largely beyond the reach of any country was now within the reach of two countries at once.” The importance of these changes was comprehensive, according to historian Juan Mora-Torres:

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19 It is important to note that Díaz and his administration were scrupulous in their adherence to the laws they passed, and thus never flagrantly stole land or aided land theft. Instead, as John Tutino has argued, Díaz sought to accelerate the pace of privatization while also trying to reduce the more odious forms of expropriation. Thus, “Díaz maintained the laws calling for the privatization of village lands and after 1885 oversaw their increasing implementation. He worked to prevent some abuses – and acknowledged his inability to prevent or correct many more.” Tutino, From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico, 269.

20 Hansen, Politics of Mexican Development, 27.

21 For examinations of Mexico City during the Porfiriato see: Pablo Piccato, City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Michael Johns, The City of Mexico in the Age of Díaz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

22 Friedrich Katz, The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 7. As Katz and a number of other historians have noted, the entry of the railroads in the 1880s also allowed the Mexican government to end Apache attacks that had plagued much of northern Mexico since the 1830s when land encroachment within the United States forced the Apaches to move their operations south of what would become the US-Mexico border. A series of military colonies were established along the Apache Frontier by the Mexican government to defend against these attacks. When the Apache were defeated, according to Katz, “[n]either the hacendados nor the government any longer needed the military support of the peasants, but what they felt they did need was the land the peasants had so assiduously reclaimed, and they felt no qualms about turning against their former allies.” Katz, Secret War in Mexico, 8. Thus, these military colonies became important sites of resistance to the emerging Porfirian economic system, and more importantly, became important
The northern states emerged as the showcase of the Porfirian economic "miracle" with its impressive railroad network linking cities, mining and industrial sites, and agricultural complexes to the United States and central Mexico. One of the far-reaching consequences of the "frontier to border" transition was that the center of economic gravity in Mexico tilted toward the north. As the zone binding Mexico and the United States, the border states leaped from their "peripheral" status vis-à-vis emergent capitalist development in Mexico to a "core" position.23

The most important effect of this economic re-centering was the steady flow of migrants leaving central Mexico and settling in the north, often as one step in a longer chain of migration.

These trends gripped all of northern Mexico, which can be seen most clearly in a close examination of the Laguna region, an area covering more than two thousand square miles that spreads across the southwestern portion of the state of Coahuila and the northeastern corner of the state of Durango. When Díaz took control of Mexico in 1876 the Laguna was a desolate area unsuited for any large-scale economic activities or high population densities. By the end of the Porfiriato, the Laguna had become the primary agricultural region in Mexico, as well as an important mining and industrial zone. The ways in which this transition occurred provide important insights into the nature of Porfirian economic and social change, in addition to providing a clear parallel to the changes that would sweep South Texas in the coming decades.24


24 The following paragraphs on the Laguna are largely dependent on the work of William Meyers and his extensive research on the region. See William K. Meyers, "Interest Group Conflict and
As was the case throughout the Mexican North, water was the Laguna’s most important and scarcest resource. The Nazas River runs through the region and was the sole source for water before the arrival of the railroads brought enough capital to make large-scale irrigation possible. Cotton was first planted in these areas in the 1840s, and would increase throughout the following decades. But the Laguna remained little more than an isolated, underdeveloped enclave that served as a regional source of cotton. The entry of the railroads into the Laguna brought increased economic opportunity and enhanced access to outside markets that helped recreate the Laguna as a thriving agricultural and industrial region.

It is clear that the rapid development of the Laguna occurred as a consequence of the program of railroad expansion that was initiated by Porfirio Díaz. The Mexican Central came to the Laguna in 1884 as it moved north from Mexico City to El Paso. The Mexican International, connecting Mexico City to Eagle Pass, arrived in the Laguna four years later. Once the railroads arrived, the area of cultivation extended down river, as well as spreading away from the river as irrigation became economically feasible. As a result, the amount of cultivated land and total production doubled between 1890 and 1910. Investment poured into the Laguna from both foreign investors and Mexican elites. Cotton became the primary agricultural product, but the early years of the twentieth century also saw a boom in guayule production, a rubber-bearing shrub that grew wild in Revolutionary Politics: A Social History of La Comarca Lagunera, 1888-1911” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1980); William K. Meyers, “La Comarca Lagunera: Work, Protest, and Popular Mobilization in North Central Mexico,” in Benjamin and Mc Nellic, Other Mexicos, 243-274; William K. Meyers, Forge of Progress, Crucible of Revolt: The Origins of the Mexican Revolution in La Comarca Lagunera, 1880-1911 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).
northern Mexico and was much in demand thanks to the pneumatic tire industry.\textsuperscript{25} Larger potential agricultural profits allowed for the expansion of railroads, irrigation, roads, and telegraph facilities, making the Laguna “the most highly capitalized and well-communicated area in Mexico.”\textsuperscript{26}

As would be the case in South Texas twenty years later, the only thing missing from the Laguna during the early years of this economic boom was a large surplus labor pool. The solution to this problem was the enormous number of migrants who were forced off the land in central Mexico. In the thirty years from 1880 to 1910 the rural population of the Laguna grew from 20,000 to 200,000, with an extra 40,000 annually living in the region during the harvest season that lasted from July to October.\textsuperscript{27} These workers were propelled by their worsening economic situation in central Mexico. By 1910 wages paid to cotton pickers in the Laguna were as high as six to eight pesos a day, several times larger than the sixty centavo wages that prevailed in other parts of the country.\textsuperscript{28} In addition, the Laguna’s integration into the national railroad network made it an

\textsuperscript{25} The guayule boom was fairly short-lived, however. Investors first tried to ship the plant to Germany where it was processed into rubber. Díaz ended this practice by placing an enormous export tax on the plants. Speculators then rushed into the Laguna and bought up every inch of land that was previously deemed too dry even for livestock because much of the land contained guayule plants. This caused a real estate bubble in the Laguna in the first decade of the twentieth century that popped in the depression of 1907, but not before land values throughout the region had quadrupled in a matter of a few years. Continental Rubber, backed by many of the largest financiers in the United States, soon moved in and cornered the guayule market, while also building a massive processing factory in Torreón. Shortly after Continental gained control of a lion’s share of the guayule market, however, it became clear that guayule shrubs took fifty years to grow, and that Continental’s aggressive move to control its cultivation in northern Mexico had been designed to eliminate the guayule shrub as a market competitor for their rubber production elsewhere. Thus, the guayule boom soon dissipated, and by 1910 the rubber shrub was no longer a major part of the Laguna agricultural economy. Meyers, \textit{Forge of Progress}, 75-76, 146-148.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 31, 33.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 34.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 7.
easy place to reach on short notice for seasonal work, and an easy place to leave once the work was done.

The agricultural work-force of the Laguna was made up of three groups. The first, and smallest group, were called *peones acasillados*, and were full-time resident workers. The second were the *peones eventuales*, who lived in the vicinity of the haciendas but were landless wage laborers who worked seasonally when labor demand increased. The third were cotton pickers who came to the Laguna each year for the cotton harvest and then left.\(^{29}\) Again, these demographic outlines look very similar to the labor and population arrangements that would form in the US West in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but they represented nothing less than a complete overturning of the normal agricultural patterns of Mexico.

Migrants to the Laguna did not come in order to find free land. Instead, it was the offer of high wages and steady employment that attracted them. This change in the nature of the Mexican agricultural economy would have profound effects in the twentieth century.\(^{30}\) The Laguna represented the beginning of a substantial pool of landless wage laborers in Mexico who were highly mobile and attuned to the nature of seasonal labor demands. These changes are what led to the tremendous growth of the number of cotton pickers and the *peones eventuales*. By 1910, the *peones eventuales* constituted a third of the region’s non-harvest

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\(^{29}\) Ibid., 116.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 117.
agricultural population.\textsuperscript{31} During harvest time, these numbers were bolstered by the large number of pickers who came for a few months.

The \textit{peones eventuales} remained in a very precarious economic situation despite their relatively high wages and the absence of the sort of coercion and peonage practices that characterized central and southern Mexico.\textsuperscript{32} As with any agricultural laborers, their income depended on the tumultuous world agricultural market, and thus they remained at risk of depressed market conditions, poor harvests, wage fluctuations, and the rest of the uncertainties that are part and parcel of commercial agriculture. Yet, by the late nineteenth century, it was a seller’s market for labor as Laguna growers, mining, and industrial interests in northern Mexico, and growers in the US Southwest all competed for the same workers. This led to the passage of anti-enticement laws in the Laguna to try and limit the mobility of the \textit{peones eventuales}.\textsuperscript{33} Growers also hired contractors who went to central Mexico and the towns and cities of northern Mexico to recruit seasonal workers when large crops were expected or when labor shortages were feared.

Planters in the Laguna also complained about increasing assertiveness among workers who had traveled to the United States to work. One hacienda administrator complained in 1905, “In the last five years everything has changed with respect to workers in the Laguna; before the peon was content with simply a

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 125.

\textsuperscript{32} See Joseph and Wells, \textit{Summer of Discontent}.

\textsuperscript{33} Meyers argued that workers used these anti-enticement laws and the labor competition that produced them to demand wage increases and additional benefits from the growers. It is unclear thus far in my research whether there is a similar negotiation instigated by workers after the passage of anti-enticement laws in Texas. I have seen little evidence of it, but it deserves more careful study. Meyers, \textit{Forge of Progress}, 127.
reed hut and 32 centavos a day. Now he demands an adobe house and a salary two or three times larger. All the haciendas in the Laguna are constructing hundreds of fincas for their workers and you can understand that if we don’t do the same we will not be able to attract workers.”34 In fact, many growers so feared the increased migration to the United States and the bad habits picked up by these migrant workers that many demanded that the Díaz government provide them with more Chinese laborers to fill in the holes in the labor force that growers feared were imminent.35

In many ways, the Laguna perfectly illustrates the broad features of Porfirian Mexico.36 As many historians have argued, however, the stability and prosperity of the Porfirian regime were shallow and tenuous.37 The economic modernization of the late nineteenth century uprooted the population and propelled people into an unstable economic environment dependent on the vagaries of the world market economy and the decisions of foreign investors. It is no accident, then, that the collapse of the Porfirian regime in 1910 occurred in part because of intense unrest in the Laguna.

The events that led to the growth of revolutionary pressure in the rest of Mexico in turn had profound effects on the Laguna. The Depression of 1907, which badly destabilized the economic growth throughout Mexico, was especially difficult for the Laguna. The market collapse devastated the agricultural, mining, and industrial interests in the region. The economic downturn also led

34 Quoted in Ibid., 131-132.
35 Ibid., 178.
36 Ibid., 35.
37 See especially Vanderwood, Disorder and Progress.
immigration officials in the US Southwest to deport Mexican agricultural workers, pushing a large pool of unemployed workers into the Laguna seeking jobs. 38 Planter reacted by arming their peones acasillados to keep the migrants from remaining in the region. 39 In addition, the 1907 harvest was damaged by the region’s worst drought in more than a decade. 40 The result was an about-face by the planters of the region, who now ignored their anti-enticement demands and instead, joining with industrial and mining interests, forcibly demanded that migrant workers leave northern Mexico and go to the United States. 41 Thus the workers confronted a drastic reversal of the situation prior to the depression of 1907. They were not wanted by either the United States or the Laguna. 42 Not surprisingly, such a situation made the Laguna fertile ground for the anti-Díaz appeals of the anarchist Partido Liberal Mexicano, whose activities and fiery rhetoric were important for the development of the Revolution in all of Mexico. 43

Revolución

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38 Meyers, Forge of Progress, 181.
39 Ibid., 185-186.
40 Ibid., 179.
41 Ibid., 186.
42 It is important to note that these pressures did differ markedly from what was happening in central Mexico, where village landlessness was the primary concern. These pressures were especially intense in areas where large-scale commercial agriculture developed, such as the sugar belt in Morelos which would become the homeland of Zapatismo. See John Womack, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (New York: Knopf, 1968).
Agrarian unrest was not new to the Laguna, but it grew to unprecedented levels after 1907. Social conflict became ubiquitous in the region, causing some in the Laguna to see threats that never existed. Reports traveled quickly around the region that an armed group called the "Mexican Cotton Pickers" were crossing from Texas into Coahuila to begin an uprising, while the Governor of Coahuila warned a number of local officials that a disturbance was imminent in the Laguna. To be fair, a number of armed attacks did occur in the towns of the Laguna between 1907 and 1910, but there is no evidence that the "Mexican Cotton Pickers" was anything but the creation of overactive imaginations. This continued unrest severed much of the support for Díaz from the Laguna elite. It is no surprise that the person most identified with the beginning of the Revolution, Francisco Madero, was a major investor in the Laguna who felt that the Porfirian system had stagnated after more than three decades. When Madero made his call for revolt against the Díaz regime in 1910, dissidents within the Laguna were some of the first to act. In the months that followed, the rest of Mexico became engulfed in what began as a political rebellion but quickly turned into a social revolution.

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44 John Tutino makes an interesting claim that conditions in the Laguna after the water and money shortages of 1907 were strikingly similar to the conditions in the Bajio region in 1810 before the Hidalgo rebellion began. In some ways this comparison seems like an unnecessary attempt to create a parallel between the two great agrarian rebellions in Mexican history that would be entirely moot if the Revolution did not begin a few years later, but it is an interesting exercise in comparative history that helps to point to the agrarian nature of both of Mexico’s great wars of national self-determination. Tutino, From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico, 304.
45 Meyers, Forge of Progress, 188.
46 Meyers, "La Comarca Lagunera," 266.
The Porfiriato was also a period of profound change across the Rio Grande in South Texas. One aspect of this was the Porfirian campaign to rid the border region of raiders who had plagued the area since the Rio Grande became the dividing line in the aftermath of the Texas Rebellion and the US-Mexico War. Díaz repaid the financial and military support that was given to him in the United States by bringing an end to large-scale raids against property north of the border. South Texans did not have to think back very far to remember the last outbreak of violence caused by these border raids. In March 1875, what has come to be known as the Skinning War broke out as a group of thirty armed Mexicans rode through the vicinity of Corpus Christi attacking stores and homes, killing five people in the process. This attack represented the beginning of a series of raids from Mexico, and an even greater number of counter-attacks by vigilantes that swept through the Nueces Strip attacking Mexican ranchers and stealing their land. Díaz put an end to these attacks and counter-attacks by cracking down on his side of the border. In fact, it appears as though the raids could only be stopped from the Mexican side because, as David Montejano has argued, "the Nueces Strip of South Texas... remained 'untamed' for nearly fifty years after

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47 See Utley, Lone Star Justice, 160; Arnoldo de León, They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 59-60; Andres Tijerina, Tejano Empire: Life on the South Texas Ranchos (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 125-126; Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 53. Montejano also argued that this outbreak of violence was caused by economic concerns. Beef prices dropped drastically in the early 1870s, so that the meat was almost worthless, but the hides were still quite valuable. According to Montejano, the "market value of hides initiated an intense competition for mavericks (unbranded cattle) in the open range. Repeated disputes over the ownership of mavericks escalated into organized 'skinning' raids and countraids on both sides of the Texas-Mexican border. South Texas Anglos organized minute companies and vigilance committees whose actions were as reprehensible as those of the 'cattle thieves.' Anglo outlaws from Corpus Christi raided the Mexican ranches, killing every adult male, burning ranch buildings and stores, and driving the Mexican ranchers away from the Upper Nueces area." Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 53.
annexation. A frontier battalion of Texas Rangers, stationed in the border zone until 1920, represented the armed force of the Anglo-Texas order.\textsuperscript{48} These raids would not resume in any substantial way until the early years of the Mexican Revolution, when Díaz’s grasp on northern Mexico was finally relinquished.\textsuperscript{49}

As in Mexico, peace and relative stability in South Texas attracted outside capital in unprecedented amounts. In fact, the history of South Texas during the period from 1876-1910 parallels the economic and demographic development of contemporaneous Mexico to a striking degree. Further, the burgeoning market of northern Mexico helped fuel many of these changes. As Anglos flooded into South Texas, they wrested economic control of the region from the previous landholders as they attempted to profit from the economic opportunity of northern Mexico at the same time that they worked to gain possession of lands belonging to Mexican Americans in the still underdeveloped region.

The first rail connection to South Texas was completed by the Southern Pacific at San Antonio in 1877, though this only served the far northern portion of the region.\textsuperscript{50} It did eliminate the need for long trail drives to the Midwest for

\textsuperscript{48} Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans}, 33.

\textsuperscript{49} The main exception to this statement was the Garza Rebellion in the early 1890s. Led by Catarino Garza, a crusading journalist from the Texas-Mexico border region, this rebellion sought to overthrow the Díaz regime, but soon became a running battle with state and federal forces north of border. See Elliott Young, \textit{Catarino Garza’s Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Among other assertions, Young argues, much like Katz and Mora-Torres have in their studies of northern Mexico, that this rebellion and its suppression helped integrate the Texas-Mexico border further into the central authority of the federal government. Further, he argues that the news reports from the border helped popularize the notion of the Rio Grande Valley as a place of unlimited economic potential that would help trigger the avalanche of land-seekers that invaded South Texas in the years after 1905.

\textsuperscript{50} In what would become a harbinger of future incompetent government in San Antonio, the city’s leaders refused to do anything to attract railroads to the region, content to remain within an isolated fiefdom where challenges to their authority, that would have been inevitable with the introduction of a rail link, were smothered by the general civic apathy. Only when the railroad was within 30 miles of the city did the railroad syndicate convince city leaders to finally endorse a
ranchers looking to send their livestock to market, but it remained too distant to act as a catalyst for agricultural growth along the rich lands of the Rio Grande Valley. The arrival of the railroad also resulted in the dispossession of those few Mexican American landholders who had managed to maintain control of their land. There were no land reform laws in the United States like those passed by the Juárez, Lerdo, and Díaz regimes, but dispossession proceeded along very similar lines, moving slowly in a series of waves that eventually reached the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the early twentieth century. Land transfers in South Texas therefore differed in some ways from what was happening at the same time in Mexico, but they were also accomplished through a similar combination of free market pressures and naked coercion, the invisible hand aided by the trigger finger.

As in Mexico, this dispossession was an uneven process that occurred at different times in different parts of South Texas, but some aspects of the process remained constant regardless of when or where land transfers took place. A combination of market pressure and physical compulsion forced many off of their land in ways that make differentiation between legal and illegal methods almost impossible. According to David Montejano, “Mexicans in Texas, especially above the Nueces, lost considerable land through outright confiscation and fraud. Below the Nueces, however, the experience of displacement was more complex. While fraud and coercion played an important part, the more systematic, more


\[51\] See Armando C. Alonzo, Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1732-1900 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).
efficient mechanism of market competition also operated there.\textsuperscript{52} Likewise, he argued that “land displacement of both a legal and fraudulent character generally expressed a market-related logic. Even conflict and outright dispossession demonstrated a sensitivity to market demands.”\textsuperscript{53} Further, “[o]nce the region had been integrated with the national market economy, there was little need for outright fraud on the part of the Anglo pioneer entrepreneurs. The natural course of free enterprise accomplished more or less the same result. The play of the market did the trick, triggering both voluntary sales and involuntary sheriff’s sales.”\textsuperscript{54}

Newly arrived lawyers greased the skids for these changes. They first descended on South Texas in the aftermath of annexation and the Mexican War, though they did not become central actors in the history of the region until the Porfirian period brought a measure of stability to the border. The growth of the northern Mexican market attracted investors to South Texas from the East Coast and Europe (primarily Britain). Lawyers well-versed in Spanish, Mexican, and US land laws became “critical intermediaries between the land-based Mexican elite and the capital-based Anglo merchants.”\textsuperscript{55} The most successful of these lawyers worked both sides of the conflict, “defending the land rights of certain

\textsuperscript{52} Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans}, 50.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 52-53.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 53. Montejano wrote this about the sheriff’s sales: “One legal method characterized by considerable ambiguity, for example, was the so-called sheriff’s sale ordered by county courts to settle tax arrears and outstanding private debts. These sales were formally auctions where the land was sold to the highest bidder, but the bids obtained were often so low that the entire court-ordered proceedings were suspect. Examples of this practice are plentiful. In June 1877, for instance, the Hidalgo County sheriff sold three thousand acres of the Hinajosa grant for a total cash price of $15.00 in order to cover tax arrears, and the following year an additional four thousand acres from the grant were auctioned for $17.15. The question about legality, thus, was often an ambiguous and pointless matter.” Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans}, 52.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 44.
Mexican families” while “persuading others that they never really owned the land.” Not surprisingly, these land lawyers also became central figures in the political machines that came to dominate the region, with James Wells becoming the archetype of the South Texas political boss. In essence, then, those who had access to credit and the best lawyers were the ones who kept their land during these years.

Regardless of the method of dispossession, land transfers fell more heavily upon Mexicans and Mexican Americans than Anglos, adding a racial component to the tangle of economic pressure and physical coercion. This was partially due to the fact that the Anglo population remained fairly small in most of South Texas until the early twentieth century, so Mexicans and Mexican Americans were much more likely to be dispossessed because they made up the vast majority of the population. But the specifics of these land transfers reveal a pattern of credit arrangements that served as a catalyst to dispossession. The inability of Mexican and Mexican American ranchers to secure credit during the frequent economic downturns and droughts of the last quarter of the nineteenth century meant that they did not possess the financial flexibility that Anglo newcomers did. The expansion of the King Ranch provides an example of these dynamics, as the pace of land purchases accelerated during economic downturns. That fact alone is neither surprising nor proof of anti-Mexican prejudice, but when combined with the prices that were paid for these lands, a pattern becomes clear. As Montejano wrote, “Mexicans parted with their land more easily under financial duress. The

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56 Evan Anders, quoted in Ibid., 44.
57 Ibid., 68.
record of King Ranch expansion, once organized according to cattle market conditions and ethnicity of seller, directly reveals the marginal situation of many Mexican landowners in the late nineteenth century. While some Anglo landholders experienced similar circumstances, many sold their property not because they had to but because of an attractive purchase offer.  

The timing of the dispossession of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in different areas of South Texas can also be traced by the gradual expansion of the rail network into the rest of South Texas in the years after 1877. From San Antonio, the Southern Pacific expanded to the border at Eagle Pass in 1878 (which then ran to the Laguna), while the International and Great Northern arrived in Laredo in 1883. At the same time, the ranching impresarios Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy combined with Corpus Christi merchant Uriah Lott to build a railroad from Corpus Christi to Laredo that was completed in 1881. These rail links had a number of important effects. First, they brought wide swaths of South Texas closer to rail heads, and therefore led to a new wave of land transfers as Anglo ranchers pressured their Mexican and Mexican American neighbors off of their lands. Second, and most importantly, by building the line between Corpus Christi and Laredo, the Lower Rio Grande Valley entered a period of isolation when Brownsville lost its spot as the primary commercial center on the Texas-Mexico border. These effects were not accidental, but instead were planned by the primary financiers of the Corpus Christi-Laredo railroad as a way to destroy the power of the Brownsville merchants, whose control of the border

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58 Ibid., 70.
trade depended on a vast network of riverboats and wagons that reached deep into the interior of Mexico.\(^{59}\)

The arrival of railroads also affected the occupational structure of South Texas in ways that were related to the increasingly landless Mexican and Mexican American populations. It is important to remember that agriculture was not the primary mode of employment in South Texas during the late nineteenth century. Ranching and trade were still the primary economic activities, and therefore were the primary sources of employment. Agriculture only replaced them after the farming boom of the early twentieth century. In 1850, one-quarter of the labor force of Bexar County (San Antonio is the county seat) were *carreteros*, *arrieros*, or some other variety of teamster working in the extensive trade network that extended beyond the border into the interior of Mexico.\(^{60}\) The economic changes that followed in the wake of the railroads and the integration of South Texas into the national and international markets drastically altered this occupational

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 98. Montejano expanded on this point: “King and Kenedy had outflanked their Brownsville rivals, for the cart and wagon trade between Brownsville and the Mexican interior could not compete with the railroad route between Corpus Christi, Laredo, and Monterrey. By 1882 the new trade route had channeled the trade away from Matamoros-Brownsville to Laredo-Corpus Christi, two hundred miles north. Laredo grew from 3,521 in 1880 to 11,319 in 1890, a phenomenal increase. Meanwhile the Brownsville area receded into isolation, its population remaining roughly between 5,000 and 6,000 people for the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. The days of the big merchant had passed for the Brownsville area. The fleet of steamboats steadily dwindled until 1903 when the last riverboat stopped its runs.”

\(^{60}\) Arnoldo De León and Kenneth L. Stewart, *Not Room Enough: Mexicans, Anglos, and Socioeconomic Change in Texas, 1850-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 25. *Carreteros* were cart-drivers who dominated the trade network of South Texas, providing the only reliable mode of transporting supplies throughout the region. These Mexican and Mexican American *carreteros* so dominated the commercial trade in South Texas that white teamsters were never able to compete with them. This one-sided rivalry led to the outbreak of “The Cart War” in 1857, when white terrorists attacked and killed a number of *carreteros* in the counties south of San Antonio. *Arrieros* carried smaller loads across the region, using mules rather than the enormous wooden wagons used by the *carreteros*. One type of *arriero*, the *aguador*, carried water from rivers to nearby ranches and towns. *Aguadores* could still be seen in the Mexican American West Side of San Antonio in the mid-twentieth century where running water was still uncommon. For an examination of the *carreteros* and *arrieros* and their importance in South Texas, see Tijerina, *Tejano Empire*, 67-71.
structure by 1900, with clear differences emerging between Anglo and Mexican occupational structures, as historians Arnoldo De León and Kenneth Stewart have shown in their statistical analysis of nineteenth century South Texas. “The impact of economic transformation on occupations in the Mexican region, then, was distinct,” they argued.

Labor in the state as a whole shifted from the agricultural sector to the service, trade, transportation, and unspecialized segments. Something approaching the reverse was true in the Mexican region, where declining opportunities were concentrated not in agriculture, but in the other specialized labor categories; the number of workers engaged in service, trade, transport, and manufacturing fell by over 35 percent between 1850 and 1900. Since demand for specialized agricultural labor neither increased nor decreased significantly, an extremely large number of workers turned for a living to unspecialized or general-labor pursuits. The shift in this region was not from agriculture to commercial and industrial specializations; rather it was from specialized, skilled occupations to unspecialized, unskilled ones.61

Thus, by 1900 there is a clear shift in the occupational structure, with a trend toward labor market segmentation developing that would only accelerate in the early twentieth century when the growth of agriculture in South Texas further reshaped the labor market.

The political structures that grew in South Texas in these years were both products of this gradual dispossession and bulwarks that acted to blunt the worst features of land transfers. Political machines developed throughout South Texas that were based on a patrón-peón bond between the Anglo political bosses and the majority Mexican and Mexican American population. Thus, these machines maintained power, like the system of jefaturas politicas in Porfirian Mexico, through an uneasy system of overlapping mechanisms of coercion and

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61 De León and Stewart, Not Room Enough, 26.
accommodation. This "peace structure," as David Montejano has described it, worked best in the more isolated portions of South Texas.\textsuperscript{62} The entry of railroads, however, drained the strength of the machines, allowing traditional machine politicians to maintain their control only in isolated areas like Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Duval Counties into the twentieth century.

The best example of a South Texas political boss was Cameron County's James Wells, who parleyed his land law practice into a dominant position within the county's Democratic Party organization. By 1910, Wells's authority stretched into neighboring counties, where proxy machines practiced what historian Evan Anders has called "the peculiar brand of South Texas politics that combined graft, voter manipulation, and armed confrontation."\textsuperscript{63} Fraudulent poll tax payments, pay-offs, and intimidation of political opposition marked each election cycle as the machine balanced the necessity of wooing Mexican American voters against the fear of the numerical superiority of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas. When the tamalada was not enough to maintain power, the machine turned to the Texas Rangers.\textsuperscript{64} As Evan Anders has argued, machine politicians were well aware of the tenuous nature of their control: "The past outbreaks of racial strife revealed the dangers of taking Mexican American subservience for granted, and the more perceptive politicians and ranchers understood the need to satisfy the popular expectations of paternalistic support.

\textsuperscript{62} Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans}, 94-95.
\textsuperscript{64} The tamalada literally just means the preparation of tamales, but is also a family or community activity that became a method used by the machines for buying votes. Tamales and beer were dispensed freely the night before an election, poll tax receipts were handed out, and voters were then herded to the polls.
and protection. Even as followers, the Hispanic majority strongly influenced the pattern of racial conduct.\textsuperscript{65}

As with changing landholding patterns, the collapse of these paternalistic political machines can be traced by the spread of railroads. Laredo’s paternalistic politics came to an end in the years after the arrival of the railroads, as two parties formed in the mid-1880s that tore apart the “peace structure” that had been in place for decades in the border town. The \textit{Botas} represented the newcomer interests that flooded into Laredo after the arrival of the railroad, while the contending \textit{Guaraches} came from the older ranching elite. When the \textit{Botas} swept fiercely contested elections for county and municipal seats, a riot erupted between the supporters of each party. Regardless, the \textit{Guaraches} soon disappeared as a meaningful political presence, relegated to junior partner status in the newly formed bipartisan Independent Club that dominated Laredo politics until the 1970s.\textsuperscript{66} Similar events happened throughout South Texas in the wake of the railroads, with older machines collapsing, while new, but substantively different, machine organizations grew up to replace them. As a result, the paternalistic politics of the late nineteenth century gave way to the appeals to white supremacy of the twentieth century. Areas that remained relatively isolated even after the railroads had reached Brownsville, such as Starr and Duval counties, continued to exist under the paternalistic machine politicians long after they disappeared in the rest of the region.

\textsuperscript{65} Anders, \textit{Boss Rule in South Texas}, 14.

\textsuperscript{66} Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans}, 95.
Stepping back and examining these changes, it is clear that the same mechanisms that created such momentous changes throughout Mexico also acted as catalysts for massive change in South Texas, with increased capitalization bringing political and economic modernization in its wake. As these larger structural changes occurred south of the border, land consolidation created the pressures for migration among the rural population that pushed them north out of central Mexico and toward the Texas-Mexico border. Once the railroads reached the border from Mexico they met up with the lines that stretched into the interior of the United States, as northward and southward waves of economic modernization came together along the Texas-Mexico border.

As a result, South Texas in the years after 1900 found itself in a situation similar to the Laguna twenty years earlier. The infrastructure of economic modernization had arrived, and with it came floods of outside capital, but the region remained sparsely settled. As had occurred in Mexico, much of the rural population had been driven off their land by these changes, creating the beginnings of an agricultural labor force. Yet, South Texas found itself at a crossroads. It possessed the transportation facilities and the capital to create a rich agricultural region, but lacked sufficient labor. Meanwhile, sky-rocketing land values triggered by this unrealized potential made traditional cattle ranching less economically viable.

The solution to these problems for the would-be planter elite of South Texas came with the collapse of the Díaz regime in 1910. Widespread violence would replace the enforced quiet of the Porfirian years and trigger a demographic
shift more momentous than the gradual northward population drift of the previous three decades. The Mexican Revolution, in other words, would change the trajectory of both nations.
Chapter 2: Revolución en la Frontera

In 1913, journalist John Reed described the border town of Ojinaga, Chihuahua, across the Rio Grande from Presidio, Texas, as a place where “hardly a house had a roof and all the walls gaped with cannon shot... Along the main street passed an unbroken procession of sick, exhausted, starving people, driven from the interior by the fear of the approaching rebels, a journey of eight days over the most terrible desert in the world. They were stopped by a hundred soldiers along the street, and robbed of every possession that took the Federals’ fancy. Then they passed on to the river, and on the American side they had to run the gauntlet of the United States customs and immigration officials and the Army Border Patrol, who searched them for arms.”

Similar circumstances obtained in the rest of Chihuahua, in much of Northern Mexico, and in large parts of Mexico as a whole. The endemic violence of the Mexican Revolution led, even forced, many to leave their homes throughout the nation and set off on the migrant trail. Some sought refuge in places like Mexico City, Monterrey, and Torreón before they ventured to the United States, but for many, crossing north of the border was the ultimate outcome of the Revolution. As Ernesto Galarza wrote in describing his own emigration away from the upheaval of the Revolution, “What brought me

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1 I am using the Spanish phrase for the title for a few reasons. For one, the English version, “Revolution on the Border,” connotes a rigid cultural and social boundary that does not exist between South Texas and Northern Mexico. Likewise, “Revolution on the Frontier” carries too much possible Turnerian baggage. The Spanish word “frontera,” however, avoids the rigidity and preconceived notions of the English translations, and instead connotes the permeable nature of the international boundary separating South Texas from Mexico during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

and my family to the United States from Mexico also brought hundreds of thousands of others like us."³

This chapter will examine the immediate effects of the Mexican Revolution on the Texas-Mexico border region. As a political rebellion deepened into a thoroughgoing social revolution, the consequences of these changes and the intense violence that accompanied them had profound effects on both sides of the Rio Grande. Within Mexico, the Revolution destabilized the nation, especially the North, and created an enormous refugee population. Coming on the heels of the momentous changes of the Porfirian years, the demographic pressures created by the collapse of the Mexican state pushed hundreds of thousands of people across the border into the United States. This population movement occurred at the same time that the last stages of modern economic development occurred along the northern bank of the Rio Grande. The combination of these two changes had profound effects on the border region, pushing South Texas through years of intense change and near apocalyptic violence that both overshadowed and added to the changes that had occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

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On February 14, 1911, Francisco Madero crossed the border from Texas into Mexico, walking into the midst of a revolution that had begun, according to the nationalist historiography of the Mexican Revolution, in his name.⁴ Four

⁴ In truth, Madero began the Mexican Revolution in much the same way that Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas. He was important for the creation of something that resembled a national rebellion against Porfirio Díaz, but his attempts to carry out the overthrow of
months earlier, Madero, the scion of one of the wealthiest families in Mexico, had left the north-central Mexican city of San Luis Potosí after his release from prison, where he was sent for his opposition to Díaz’s reelection in 1910. He fled to Texas, where he immediately went to work gathering support for the overthrow of Díaz. The irony that Díaz had done the same thing thirty-four years earlier seems to have been lost on Madero. Shortly after arriving in San Antonio, Madero announced his Plan de San Luis Potosí, back-dated to October 5, 1910, (Madero’s last day in San Luis Potosí) to avoid the appearance of any violation of United States neutrality laws. The plan called for a series of ill-defined, decidedly modest reforms that would be carried out when Madero had secured the presidency. The rebellion was scheduled to begin on November 20, 1910. Two days before that fateful date, Madero left San Antonio to join up with a force of hundreds of Coahuilans who would then lay siege to the symbolically important border town of Ciudad Porfirio Díaz (now Piedras Negras), across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass, Texas. On the way, however, they became disoriented and spent a night wandering through the chaparral of South Texas. Finally, on November 19 they crossed the border and met a contingent of only ten men.5 Realizing that their tiny force would accomplish little, Madero abandoned his plans and returned

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to San Antonio, where he would remain for three more months. Thus began the Maderista Revolution. 6

While Madero remained in exile, however, his mostly urban supporters watched as a rural rebellion developed beyond their control. He finally re-entered Mexico at the head of a hundred men, one step ahead of US law enforcement. Mexican spies, the private detectives of the Furlong Agency, and US federal investigators had been harassing Madero in San Antonio, but by February it

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6 An exhaustive explanation of the Mexican Revolution is obviously beyond the scope of this study, but laying out the broad outlines of the Revolution is essential for understanding what occurred in Northern Mexico and South Texas during the 1910s and 1920s. Therefore, I will begin this chapter with an examination of the course of the Revolution, especially in the North, with special focus on the local origins of much of the rebellion, the effects of this violence on emigration to the United States, the importance of the US border as a place of refuge (and sometimes persecution) for a number of revolutionary factions, and the role played by the US (both officially and privately) in the Revolution. I should also note that, while 1920 often serves as the end-date for the Revolution, when Alvaro Obregón assumed the presidency and began the institutionalization of the post-revolutionary regime, I will consider the period from 1910-1929 as the revolutionary era. While the government was never again overthrown after 1920, that does not mean that challenges to the government did not arise in the 1920s. The De la Huerta rebellion and the Cristero War were just two of the largest challenges to the Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles governments during the 1920s. While the violence of these years certainly did not approach the violence of 1915, the continued upheaval served as an important push-factor for emigration to the US, and therefore, should be considered along with the first decade of the Revolution. In addition, creating an artificial division between the 1910s and 1920s smacks of the self-interested teleology that the Partido de la Revolución Institucional (PRI) used to justify its single-party rule for seventy years, helping to paint all non-government-sanctioned activities in the 1920s as necessarily counterrevolutionary.

became clear that Madero would be arrested for violation of US neutrality laws if he remained in Texas any longer. In addition, by February, a number of nominally Maderista forces had emerged throughout the North, threatening to move beyond Madero’s leadership. Once in Mexico, then, Madero tried to rein in the revolutionary forces, which, at that point, had not seized any of the cities but held unquestioned control throughout the mountains of Northern Mexico. Having taken on a logic of its own beyond Madero’s leadership, the Revolution continued to spread. By April, 1911, the Laguna was overrun with rebel bands. Only Torreón remained in federal hands, and then only until May 15 when the federal commander retreated under dark, giving up one of the primary cities of the North without a fight.

Torreón’s fall came just five days after the federal garrison at Ciudad Juárez surrendered to the forces of Pascual Orozco, a native northerner who laid siege to the city in spite of Madero’s insistence that a siege of the border city could cause damage across the Rio Grande in El Paso and trigger intervention from the US, a seemingly ever-present concern for northern revolutionaries. With these twin victories at Ciudad Juárez and Torreón, the Díaz regime disintegrated, with Díaz agreeing to step down on May 25. With the image of authority now gone, armed bands multiplied across the nation. Madero and his associates would spend the next several months trying to consolidate their control.

If everything had ended after Madero’s election as president in October 1911, there would be little reason to call this a revolution. The importance of

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these events for the course of Mexican history would have been negligible, and its consequences north of the Rio Grande temporary and slight. There was obviously violence and turmoil during the anti-Díaz uprising, especially in the North, but it paled in comparison to what would come in the next years as shifting alliances and political assassinations led to continuing upheaval that would engulf parts of the nation into the late 1920s. The Maderista Revolution, then, was merely the first halting step in a devastatingly destructive, thoroughgoing social revolution that would have profound effects on both sides of the border.

Rebellions plagued the Maderista state, with two separate military forces attempting uprisings from exile in Texas: the first a farcical disaster (Bernardo Reyes in 1911), while the second posed a dangerous challenge to the stability of the new regime (Pascual Orozco, the former Maderista general, in 1912). Madero’s refusal to push for agrarian reform led to another rupture within the anti-Díaz coalition, as the Zapatista rebels of Morelos continued their fight against the new federales, seeing no difference between Madero and Díaz when it came to their agrarian concerns. In addition, a number of local serrano rebellions broke out throughout the nation as villages tried to reassert autonomy at the same time that Madero’s government sought to strengthen its own shaky hold over the national territory. Madero had only achieved a tenuous authority over the major leaders in northern and central Mexico when he was unceremoniously overthrown and assassinated in 1913 by Victoriano Huerta, the head of the reconstituted federal military.
Huerta’s coup threw gasoline on the already combustible situation throughout Mexico, igniting even fiercer and more destructive fighting. Widespread guerrilla war rapidly seized the Mexican countryside. Northern Mexico again took the lead in this revolt, though in various, often conflicting ways. The first to pronounce against Huerta was Venustiano Carranza, a Sonoran active in Porfirian politics, who went into exile in San Antonio at the same time as Madero, but remained there until the fall of Ciudad Juárez, entering the revolutionary fray at the last minute as an important northern power-broker. Carranza became the standard-bearer of one strand of the northern revolution, which was a top-down, moderate reformism that dominated the states of Sonora and Coahuila throughout the 1910s.

The most important aspect of the northern revolution (at least in its anti-Huerta phase), however, was the popular revolution as embodied in Pancho Villa and the ill-defined serrano bands that cohered under his control as the División del Norte. While Villa and Carranza later split, during the fight against Huerta they maintained a strong alliance, united under the banner of Constitutionalism, with Villa acting as the bludgeon that routed the federal troops throughout strategically important north-central Mexico, while Carranza put forward the respectable face of a moderate landholder who would rein in the more radical tendencies of the popular revolutionary groups. By the middle of 1913 Villa’s army had moved south from its home base in Chihuahua and driven the federals

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8 The Huerta regime was quick to make use of the regional make-up of this opposition, asserting that the northerners were trying to secede from Mexico, focusing especially on the elite-led revolution in Sonora: “Sonora would play the part of a twentieth-century Texas.” Quoted in Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, II: 17.
out of Torreón, forcing Huerta to relinquish control of much of the North outside of a few cities.

The combined onslaught of Villa's northern forces, the constant harassment of the Zapatistas just south of the capital, and the hostility of the Wilson administration in Washington, led Huerta into exile by mid-1914. As in 1911, however, the disappearance of a common enemy led to the fracturing of the Constitutionalist coalition into its component parts. The resulting fight, pitting the armies of Carranza and Obregon (maintaining the name Constitutionalist) against the loosely allied and geographically separated armies of Zapata and Villa (grouped together under the title of Conventionists), would bring an even more destructive period of civil war which saw massive conventional armies criss-crossing the nation in the midst of a continuing guerrilla war that often took on the aspects of organized banditry (especially to the jaundiced eyes of exiled elites and threatened landowners). 9

9 While there were certainly differences in the leadership of these groups, as Alan Knight has argued, attempting to portray these forces as class-based is too simplistic. Carrancistas were not all elite landowners, Obregónistas were not all part of an upwardly mobile bourgeoisie, and Villistas were not all frontier rebels. Instead, identification with the sides in this phase of the Revolution was dictated by "immediate, tactical, personal imperatives" rather than narrow class interests or any sort of ideology. While this makes simple categorization more difficult, it correctly emphasizes the complex nature of these years, where many local forces assumed and discarded a number of different factional affiliations according to local needs and according to the political and military situations that adhered at any given time. See Knight, Mexican Revolution, II: 264-285. John Hart, on the other hand, does argue that these coalitions were largely determined by class. See Hart, Revolutionary Mexico, 278-321. As Knight points out, however, there was a difference in the goals envisioned by the leadership of these forces. Villa and Zapata maintained a localized focus that focused on their respective home territories of Chihuahua and Morelos, and thus failed to create more than a cursory national vision. Carranza and Obregón, on the other hand, while they were based in the northwestern state of Sonora, did present a more national vision for the postrevolutionary regime, and more importantly, they took pains to create an administrative system that went beyond the agrarian and military concerns that dominated the thinking of Villa and Zapata.
When this stage of the Revolution began, Villa held unquestioned control of most of the Mexican North, most importantly the valuable arms trade routes along the US-Mexico border. Villista control also extended into much of western Mexico. Carranza and Obregon, on the other hand, remained isolated in Veracruz, with other small pockets of control scattered throughout the nation. Still, in a series of battles in 1915, Obregon was able to defeat Villa and destroy the Division del Norte as the nation’s dominant military force. The collapse of the Villista military pushed Carranza into unquestioned national political dominance, a position he would maintain until 1920. Thus, in some ways, the decisive events of 1915 brought an end to one phase of the Revolution, and thereafter the Carrancista state would remain intact in spite of almost continuous upheaval and rebellion that would continue until the end of the 1920s.  

Regardless, much of Mexico faced continued violence, often unattached or only nominally attached to the factional squabbles apparent on the national level, that was every bit as disruptive as the more traditional military campaigns of previous  

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10 The fragmentation of the Division del Norte did not mean that Villa disappeared as a military presence. Instead, he carried on a fierce guerrilla war in his home state of Chihuahua that continued to disrupt this already hard-hit state for the next few years. One important aspect of this new brand of Villismo was its unpredictability. The most notorious example of this was Villa’s decision to attack Columbus, New Mexico on March 9, 1916, with a force of five hundred guerrillas. He attacked in revenge against the US government which had recently recognized the Carranza regime and had worked to cut off all arms sales and shipments to the Villistas. He also hoped that the attack would prompt US intervention which would put Carranza in the impossible position of trying to appease Washington without allowing US troops onto Mexican soil. Six days later, as Villa had presumed, Wilson sent troops into Mexico for the second time during the Revolution, launching the farcical Expeditionary Force, which remained in Mexico for eleven months. They never accomplished their goal of finding and eliminating Villa’s military forces, but this soon receded in importance as Wilson and his administration made it clear that they were trying to leverage a timetable for withdrawing the troops into authority within the Carrancista regime. Some US policymakers even went so far as declaring that Wilson should apply a measure similar to the Platt Amendment to “Cubanize” the troublesome Mexicans. The force finally left Mexico in February 1917 after it became clear that the US government would be unable to wrestle any autonomy away from Mexico. See Hart, Revolutionary Mexico, 321; Katz, Secret War in Mexico, 307, 310-312.
years. This general pattern would continue, in fact, into the late 1920s, as localized violence continued to plague much of the nation as the central government remained largely unable to create a stable national state.\textsuperscript{11}

The state of Chihuahua provided the best example of this continued instability. As the cradle of the revolution, Chihuahua endured almost constant upheaval throughout the 1920s. First, the specter of Villa continued to haunt the state, even after he laid down his arms after coming to terms with Obregón in 1920. Even after his assassination in 1923, the remnants of the Villista military force maintained the capacity to wage guerrilla war in the rugged mountains of Northern Mexico. In addition, hardly a year passed without some major uprising.

\textsuperscript{11} One manifestation of the lack of a stable and powerful central government was the continued, and in some instances strengthened, existence of caciques who acted as local and regional power brokers that enjoyed a measure of autonomy from the Obregónista and Callista governments. Saturnino Cedillo in San Luis Potosí (who remained the primary authority in his state until the late 1930s), Emilio Portes Gil in Tamaulipas, Juan Andreu Almazán in Nuevo León, and Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacan, among others, were able to maintain regional political control through means that looked very much like the practices of South Texas political machines, often using land distribution as a means to garner popular authority. Throughout the 1920s, the central government could do little without the cooperation of these regional power brokers, providing the possibility of instability similar to the Porfirián system, even if the social basis of this regional control had changed. See Stuart F. Voss, "Nationalizing the Revolution: Culmination and Circumstance," in Benjamin and Wasserman, eds., \textit{Provinces of the Revolution}, 273-317; Heather Fowler Salamini, "Tamaulipas: Land Reform and the State," Benjamin and Wasserman, eds., \textit{Provinces of the Revolution}, 185-217; Dudley Ankerson, "Saturnino Cedillo, a Traditional Caudillo in San Luis Potosí, 1890-1938," in D.A. Brading, ed., \textit{Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution}, 140-168. While this contradicts both the official history of the PRI and the revisionist history of the 1960s and 1970s (which saw the regime of Plutarco Elías Calles, first as president from 1924-1928, and then as the power behind the throne from 1928-1934, as a sort of omnipotent leviathan state), it reveals the continuing struggle over issues of the legacy of the revolution and grass-roots issues of autonomy that had not been resolved by the military outcome of the 1910s. Two of the most representative works of this revisionist school are John Womack, "The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920," in Leslie Bethell, ed., \textit{Mexico Since Independence} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 125-200; and Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, \textit{The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1905-1924} (New York: Norton, 1980). As the title of Ruiz's book indicates, he denied that a revolution had occurred at all. Instead, he argued that from the beginning the anti-Díaz uprising was led and controlled by bourgeois elements who subsumed and dominated the isolated popular elements of the rebellions, leading to the authoritarian reality of the post-World War II Mexican one-party state. Or as Womack wrote, "[t]he problem that professional historians could not ignore was a sense spreading after 1940 that Mexico was developing along the lines more of the old regime than of the supposed Revolution." Womack, "Mexican Revolution," 127.
In 1921 the state militia crushed an uprising of hundreds of indigenous villagers in southwestern Chihuahua. A number of rebel bands operated throughout the state in 1922, though they were eventually dispersed by federal troops. In December 1923, one of the largest rebellions of the 1920s began when Adolfo de la Huerta, who had been interim president after the overthrow of Carranza in 1920, pronounced against Obregón and rallied much of the military to his side. Delahuertista forces continued fighting in Chihuahua through much of 1924. Nicolas Hernández, a leader of the delahuertista rebellion, declared his own rebellion in mid-1925, and continued guerrilla operations until 1927. A coup against the state governor in 1927 led to another guerrilla outbreak that lasted until 1928. In addition, banditry remained endemic throughout the decade, sometimes melting into the organized violence of the above mentioned uprisings. Thus, as Mark Wasserman has argued, “all Chihuahua earned for a decade of civil war was another decade of chaos.”

The most disruptive outbreak of the decade, however, occurred in west-central Mexico, and would have repercussions throughout the nation. In some ways, this struggle was a continuation of the traditional struggle between liberals and the Church in Mexico. But the Cristero Rebellion, as it came to be known, was also a complex struggle between the Mexican state, which sought to destroy the power of the Church as one aspect of its effort to consolidate centralized control, and a dissenting popular movement that contested the outcome of the Revolution and its institutionalization – part religious war, part renewal of the

13 Ibid., 229.
localized rural violence of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{14} The uprising occurred in a part of Mexico that had seen little military action during the 1910s, and had little voice in the construction of the post-revolutionary state. For three years west-central Mexico became a battleground between advocates of local control of politics and land, and the Callista state which sought to use agrarian reform and a form of top-down anti-clericalism to crush a movement they depicted as counterrevolutionary.\textsuperscript{15}

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This continued violence forced more than a million Mexicans to migrate to the United States during the 1910s and 1920s. These exiles left behind the continued disorder and potential danger of the revolutionary process for a number of different reasons, though most embarked on their journey north of the border with the belief that it was temporary.

Politics and factionalism helped create a large body of emigrants. Former Porfiristas, Huertistas, and any number of other out-groups left for the United States throughout the 1910s and 1920s. San Antonio became the unofficial capital of exiled Mexico, though elite exile communities also developed in Los Angeles, El Paso, and New Orleans. Many of these émigrés hoped to eventually return to their homeland, but remained on the sidelines while the Revolution continued. There was also a noisy minority of this political exile population who


\textsuperscript{15} Paul S. Taylor, \textit{A Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community: Arandas in Jalisco, Mexico} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), esp. 36-40.
sought to re-enter the fray, hoping to retrace the steps taken by both Díaz and Madero in conquering Mexico from across the Rio Grande.

Another factor that fueled emigration was the threat of impressment into one of the countless armed groups that circulated throughout the country. Huerta became notorious for his indiscriminate use of the *leva* to fill his Federal Army, but all military forces used the tactic at some point during the Revolution. Pablo Mares, a miner from a village near the western city of Guadalajara, Jalisco, “had to come to the United States, because it was impossible to live down there with so many revolutions. Once even I was at the point of being killed by some revolutionists. . . . The Villistas pressed me into service then, and took me with them as a soldier. But I didn’t like that, because I never liked to go about fighting, especially about things that don’t make any difference to one. So when we got to Torreón I ran away just as soon as I could. That was about 1915. . . . I went from there to Ciudad Juárez and from there to El Paso. There I put myself under contract to go work on the tracks.”16 For those who chose not to fight, then, exile often seemed the safest option.

Beyond the direct threats to life and limb occasioned by military violence, the Revolution demolished the Mexican economy, leading many to emigrate to avoid starvation. The Porfirian economic growth had been built on the construction of a modern transportation and communication network, which allowed for the expansion of commercial agriculture, mining, industry, and every facet of the national economy. When this economic infrastructure collapsed

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under the pressure of years of civil war, hyper-inflation, decreased agricultural and industrial production, disrupted trade networks, and food shortages reached catastrophic proportions. At the core of these problems was the deterioration of the national railroad network, which remained the linchpin of the Mexican economic system. Part of the problem stemmed from lack of investment capital within the disordered nation, which precluded any large-scale rebuilding efforts, but direct physical damage wrought the most devastation. The professional militaries ripped up tracks across the nation, especially in the North, to cut the supply lines of opposing armies. The Villista forces became notorious for their use of "máquinas locas," train engines packed with explosives that would be sent careening toward opposing troop and supply trains.\(^7\) Guerrilla forces often targeted tracks, bridges, and other railroad facilities, and would continue to do so well into the 1920s.\(^8\) With Mexico's transportation network thus disrupted for years, mining and agricultural enterprises, where such activities were still possible in spite of the violence, had difficulty reaching secondary processing facilities in urban areas, which then had trouble finding access to international markets as rail lines to Veracruz, Tampico, and the US-Mexico border had been reduced to scrap metal.

The consequences of this deterioration of primary production, processing, and trade were dire. These economic disruptions caused the peso to decline against the dollar, first slowly, but then rapidly beginning in 1913. In January

\(^8\) Official correspondence of May 26, 1919, Box 1, Record Group 76, Entry 154, *United States and Mexican Claims Commission—Reports on Conditions Along the Mexican Border, 1911-1919*, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
1913 the peso was worth 49.5 cents (US). It dropped to 7 cents two years later in January 1915, stood at 2 cents in May 1916, and continued to drop. These problems were only exacerbated by Carranza and Villa, who printed massive amounts of paper money that continued to deteriorate in value from the moment they were printed. Capital circulation collapsed, and much of the nation reverted to a barter economy wherever foreign currency was not available. In the North, dollars became the primary legal tender, though access to dollars was limited by the hyper-inflation which made pesos almost worthless in relation to the dollar. These problems combined with the transportation situation to create a chronic shortage of circulating capital that rapidly became a crisis of subsistence for much of the nation.

Disease also ravaged Mexico’s population during the Revolution and its aftermath. Typhus, which often follows in the wake of war, devastated much of the nation, reaching its high point in 1916 and 1917. When that epidemic subsided, it was replaced in 1918 by the worldwide influenza pandemic. Northern Mexico’s war-weary population was especially hard-hit by influenza during an especially deadly, if relatively brief, outbreak.

Thus, there were many pressing reasons why the Revolution created large emigration waves during the 1910s and 1920s, even if some historians have

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19 Knight, Mexican Revolution, II: 409.
20 Weekly Border Condition Report, Brownsville, Texas, September 2, 1916, Box 1, Memorandum 7. Entry 825 – Records of United States Commissioners of American and Mexican Joint Commission – Memorandums Furnished by the Department of State, 1916 (Hereafter Gray-Lane Files), Department of State, Record Group 43, USNA.
21 Knight, Mexican Revolution, II: 415. See also Dudley Dwyre (US Consul in Guadalajara), American Foreign Service Report, March 7, 1925, File 52903/66, Box 894, Record Group 85, USNA, Washington, DC. Dwyre argued that Mexicans left for the United States because of the continued instability, in addition to supposed anger over agrarian reform (which remained prima facie proof of communism in the Mexican government for many US diplomats).
ignored these factors. Violence, economic collapse, food shortages, disease, and any number of other factors helped create a massive body of exiles and refugees, some of whom had previously been driven out of the central plateau by the changes wrought by Porfirian modernization, who moved across the largely unguarded border into the United States.  

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For the first two decades of the twentieth century migration across the US-Mexico border was largely unregulated. Customs and immigration officials staffed “ports of entry” along the international boundary, but were neither equipped nor trained to deal with those immigrants who crossed into the United States at any point other than designated entry zones. The scant immigration legislation on the books in the early twentieth century was written with sea ports in mind, and limited only certain types of immigrants. Restrictions targeted the diseased, prostitutes, anarchists, those likely to become public charges, contract laborers, and Asians as threats to the general welfare.

Immigration officials largely ignored the entry of Mexicans into the US for the first fifteen years of the century. An Immigration Service report from these years stated that “the policing of 2,000 miles of border line is practically

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22 See Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration (New York: Routledge, 2003). Gonzalez and Fernandez argue that the Mexican Revolution had very little effect on migration to the United States. Instead, they point to the Porfian era and the growth of US economic interests in Mexico as the essential cause of large-scale emigration. The primary problem with this analysis is that it overstates the importance of US capital and casts the Porfian regime as little more than a helpless adjunct of foreign capital.

23 The INS archives are filled with evidence of this displacement into the United States, primarily Texas. See especially Files 53108/71-71P, Boxes 1110-1112, Record Group 85.
impossible." 24 The problem for the Immigration Service was not immigrants from Mexico, but instead was "aliens who arrive in Mexico" who "do not enter that Republic with the intention of remaining permanently. The bulk of them are contract laborers, but whether they come under contract or not, they proceed to Mexico with the idea that they can reach the United States easier and escape the prescribed examination by simply evading the regular points of crossing, and entering surreptitiously." 25 Particularly distressing for immigration officials was the attempted entry of Japanese and Chinese workers via Mexico, though immigrants from Europe and the Middle East were also targeted as frequent violators of US immigration law.

In 1908 the Secretary of Labor and Commerce (whose department then housed the Immigration Service) wrote to the Secretary of State that "little if any difficulty is experienced in dealing with citizens of Mexico; the difficulties encountered relate almost wholly to foreigners of other nationalities." 26 Immigration officials displayed some concern over Mexicans who came to the United States on labor contracts, in violation of the 1886 Foran Act, which prohibited such arrangements between US employers and foreign workers. As historian Gunther Peck has shown, however, enforcement of contract labor law was anything but consistent, and largely dependent on the whims of immigration

24 "Report of Conditions Existing in Europe and Mexico Affecting Emigration and Immigration," no date, File 51411/1, Box 23, Record Group 85. USNA.  
25 "Report of Conditions Existing in Europe and Mexico Affecting Emigration and Immigration," no date, File 51411/1, Box 23, Record Group 85. USNA.  
26 Secretary of Labor and Commerce Oscar Strauss to Secretary of State Elihu Root, February 12, 1908, File 41463/B, Box 53, Record Group 85. USNA.
inspectors. J.W. Berkshire, the Supervising Inspector in El Paso, who was notorious for selectively ignoring contract labor violations committed by favored contractors, summed up the feelings of elements within the immigration service in 1910 when he wrote, “any restriction against the Mexican laborer would be an unfair discrimination as long as no additional restrictive measures are enforced against aliens of other races.”

Before the most violent phases of the Revolution, in other words, the Immigration Service viewed immigration from Mexico as expected and non-threatening. Indeed, the Commissioner-General of Immigration wrote in 1913 that “Mexico is a natural supply of labor for the Southwest, and therefore the movement of laborers across the border is for the most part a natural one. Such laborers have been passing back and forth over the border for years, and in the great majority of cases the only apparent inducement to migrate is a knowledge that work at better wages than prevail in Mexico can be found here. Such immigration, of course, is not in violation of law.”

Still, refugees who reached the US-Mexico border during the early years of the Revolution were hardly welcomed into the United States with open arms. The well-dressed walked across the border with little problem, but many who tried to cross at the designated border crossing stations, such as Brownsville and Laredo, often met with opposition from immigration agents and other officials in

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28 J.W. Berkshire to Commissioner-General of Immigration Daniel J. Keefe, June 30, 1910, File 52546/31B Folder 1, Box 670, Record Group 85. USNA.
29 Commissioner-General of Immigration to Secretary of Labor, March 12, 1913, File 52546/31G, Box 671, Record Group 85. USNA.
the United States who sought to limit the refugee flow. The Immigration Inspector at Laredo described the Revolution’s effects on the type of immigrant that entered the United States:

Before the revolution began and for some time after, we had each day from two to four Pullmans, most well filled; three to five first-class coaches and two to four second-class coaches. First the Pullman class disappeared, then the first-class traveler, until now we have only the second-class arrival; and even this class has deteriorated. In normal times we had many of the laboring class who were in the prime of life and fine specimens of physical manhood. This class has almost entirely disappeared, and only the ordinary laborer and a few women and children are now coming.30

An incident from October 1913 provides a good example of the ways in which US border officials reacted to these Mexican immigrants. On October 1 and 2 thousands of refugees crossed from Piedras Negras to Eagle Pass, Texas, as the Constitutionalists seized the town from the Federals. Almost all returned by the 5th, but that night word spread that the Federals planned to attack the town. The next morning, October 6, the County Commissioners in Eagle Pass declared a quarantine against Piedras Negras, in a transparent effort to keep the new influx of refugees from remaining in Eagle Pass. Since most of the population of Piedras Negras attempted to cross via the international bridge, the quarantine created a combustible situation where thousands of refugees crowded on the bridge, creating the very real possibility of trampling deaths. The Immigration Service Inspector for Eagle Pass brought these concerns to the County Commissioners, but they refused to allow refugees into Eagle Pass. The Immigration Service was then forced to provide temporary refuge outside of the city limits, and at 1 PM

“such of the aliens as were admissible were permitted to enter during the afternoon, but the crowd, instead of lessening, seemed to steadily increase.” 31

The crowds continued to congregate on the bridge for the next twenty-four hours, with the Immigration Service estimating that eight thousand crossed the bridge on the second day alone. When the Federals entered Piedras Negras that afternoon, the refugee waves ended as the troops stopped all traffic over the bridge.

On the next day, however, the Immigration Service decided that “if the aliens in detention were fed they would continue on our hand indefinitely. Therefore, it was decided to discontinue feeding them.” 32 Since many of these refugees were Constitutionalists, they knew that return to Piedras Negras could be deadly, but officials in Eagle Pass were intent on sending the refugees back as soon as possible. Immigration inspectors “found that a considerable number belonged to the excluded classes [that is those ‘likely to become a public charge’]. Up to that time, very few had signified a willingness to return to their homes and, realizing that some immediate and positive action was necessary, it was decided to take a number, at least, of the excludable aliens out of camp and return them to Piedras Negras.” 33 Over the next two weeks hundreds of refugees were sent back as excludable aliens. Some were given temporary admission, but not before undergoing a physical examination, a series of vaccinations, and fumigation of all belongings. The Immigration Service Supervising Inspector ended his report on

31 J.W. Berkshire to Commissioner-General of Immigration, October 21, 1913, File 53108/71G, Box 1111, RG 85, USNA.
32 Berkshire to Commissioner-General, October 21, 1913, File 53108/71G, Box 1111, RG 85, USNA.
33 Berkshire to Commissioner-General, October 21, 1913, File 53108/71G, Box 1111, RG 85, USNA.
this incident by stating that, while cooperation from officials in Eagle Pass would have alleviated some of the strains of the refugee situation, immigration officials should proceed along these same lines in future incidents, allowing refugees into the US when necessary, but maintaining a strict prohibition against the excludable classes that would force many of these migrants back to Mexico.34

Clearly, while no coherent legislation yet limited who could enter, the “likely to become a public charge” prohibition became a simple way for immigration officials to limit the number of entrants during the Revolution. In addition, poor women were often denied admittance because it was feared they were prostitutes who would bring disease and immorality into the United States.35 Thus, while nothing like the Chinese Exclusion Act existed to keep Mexicans from entering the United States, the class and racial assumptions held by immigration officials and Anglos in the US meant that there was a loosely enforced exclusionary spirit that animated contact between border guards and Mexican immigrants. Thus, the years of the Revolution marked the beginning of a more conscious, if still largely unofficial, policy of limiting who could and should enter the United States from Mexico.36

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The world that these immigrants walked into when they crossed the border, with or without authorization, was a rapidly changing one. As outlined in

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34 Berkshire to Commissioner-General, October 21, 1913, File 53108/71G, Box 1111, RG 85, USNA.
35 See J.W. Berkshire to Commissioner-General of Immigration, May 18, 1911, 53108/71A, Box 1110, RG 85, USNA.
36 Chapter 5 covers the continuing evolution of US immigration policy as it pertained to Mexico after 1917.
the last chapter, South Texas underwent profound changes during the Porfirian years as the entry of railroads helped create an entirely new social and economic system. The one exception was the Lower Rio Grande Valley, which remained isolated from these changes for two decades, as the rail link from Corpus Christi to Laredo bypassed Brownsville and left Cameron and Hidalgo Counties largely unchanged despite the turmoil in the rest of South Texas. When a rail link finally reached Brownsville in 1904, it brought profound consequences for the Lower Valley and all of South Texas along with it.

All of the problems of increased capitalization that had occurred in the rest of South Texas during the last two decades of the nineteenth century now occurred rapidly in the deep South Texas counties of Cameron and Hidalgo, turning them seemingly overnight from sparsely settled, arid ranching lands into prime farm properties. The combination of the two decade reprieve that the Lower Valley enjoyed while the rest of the region dealt with issues of displacement and landlessness, and the rapidity of these changes in the years after 1904, led to an explosive situation in which a boom economy recreated a far more intense form of social tension that fell especially hard on the remaining Mexican American landowners.

One of the most important consequences the entry of railroads had for this region was the impetus it gave for the development of irrigation works. Before 1904, some had tried to use the Rio Grande as an irrigation source, but it required pumps and lifts to utilize the streamflow, since the geography of the region did not allow for gravity irrigation. Since the river often changed its channel and was
prone to flooding, installing expensive irrigation equipment without a reliable trade link to the US market made little economic sense. Only with the construction of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexican Railroad did the possible profit begin to outweigh the risk. With the introduction of large-scale irrigation the Lower Rio Grande Valley made a rapid, chaotic transition from ranch to farm.

Large-scale irrigation only amplified the problems introduced by the railroad, though it also brought a new series of issues that would have equally profound effects on both sides of the Rio Grande. As landowners and prospective farmers rushed to draw water from the river that connected South Texas to Northern Mexico, they used up almost all of the dependable streamflow of the Rio Grande. The timing of these developments was essential, because the fighting in Mexico meant that no central authority existed to deal with issues like water rights. Also important were the legal traditions of each nation. Mexico abided by Hispanic law, in which the state owned the water. Water rights had to be contracted out to landowners. The US, on the other hand, followed the English tradition of riparian rights which gave possession of water to the landowner. Thus, the US government, which had the capacity to deal with issues of illegal water usage during the 1910s while no government held sway in Mexico, instead stood back and claimed that riparian rights doctrine tied its hands. According to the ill-defined international law on the subject, Mexico should have been allowed the right to half the streamflow, but with no leverage during the development of

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these irrigation works, and with the US government eventually declaring that “prior rights” of irrigators in Texas trumped all other concerns, the violations continued.\(^{38}\) Thus, by 1920 the pattern was set, and most of the dependable streamflow of the Rio Grande was diverted into the fields of South Texas, helping to turn it into one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the nation. The adjacent state of Tamaulipas, which had the potential for similar development, had no means for securing irrigation water. The land under irrigation in South Texas increased from 54,000 acres in 1909 to 228,000 acres in 1919. In Tamaulipas, 2,000 acres were under irrigation in 1910, which only increased to 20,000 acres by 1930.\(^{39}\) Thus, as James Sandos has argued, “Mexico unwillingly paid with water” for the development of large-scale agriculture in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.\(^{40}\)

With market access and a reliable water supply, the shift from ranching to farming in the Lower Valley began in earnest. Increased land values led to increased tax valuations, which meant that many ranchers had to sell their unimproved lands. Pasture land in the late nineteenth century cost between fifty cents and two dollars an acre. By the 1910s, unimproved land cost as much as $300 an acre, while land close to existing irrigation facilities sold for as much as $500 an acre.\(^{41}\) For some, these land sales led to a profitable retirement. In 1911, an observer noted that a new type of nouveau riche appeared in San Antonio:

\(^{39}\) Sandos, Rebellion in the Borderlands, 71.
“rich rancher – bought land for a trifle and sold to farmers – worth half a million.” 42 For others, the farm boom offered an opportunity to leave the sagging livestock market. For many ranchers, however, selling their land promised nothing more than economic uncertainty and a possible slide into wage labor. As in the late nineteenth century, these changes were especially damaging for Mexican American rancheros faced with a potent combination of market pressure and violence. Lon Hill, a landowner and developer of an irrigation company in Harlingen, was notorious for taking land from Mexican rancheros through threats. Speaking to a jury looking into the legality of one of his land seizures, Hill bragged that he told a Mexican ranchero “to pack up his doll rags and piss on the fire, and he was gone.” 43

At the same time that these economic changes occurred in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, South Texas also struggled to deal with the implications of the Revolution occurring just across the border. A number of factions went into exile in South Texas, waiting for a chance to reenter the fray within Mexico, making San Antonio the center of revolutionary machinations. These plotters shared the city with spies, private detectives, arms smugglers, and others drawn to the vibrant and conspiratorial exile community. 44 Widespread fears circulated as the refugee population grew throughout South Texas, leading many Anglos to view the immigrant wave as a possible fifth column in the rapidly changing region.

43 Quoted in Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 33-34.
44 See Raat, Revoltosos, 179-198.
Finally, frequent cross-border attacks led to an unprecedented military mobilization along the border that turned South Texas into an armed camp. When these rising tensions combined with the pressures created by rapid social and economic change, the consequences were nothing short of apocalyptic.

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s San Antonio served as the capital of exiled Mexico, though Los Angeles, El Paso, and New Orleans also served as important centers where "frustrated políticos, defeated generals and dispossessed landlords met, conspired, hoped and dreamed, churning out protests, plans and polemics, all under the watchful eye of Mexican and American intelligence." Madero was just the first in a long line of exiled leaders to organize an opposition movement in the United States before returning to Mexico at the head of an armed force. Bernardo Reyes spoke openly in 1911 of organizing in San Antonio so that he could return to Mexico and overthrow Madero, and his organizing efforts were aided by politicians and power brokers in South Texas. The Adjutant General of Texas even complained that "federal, county, and city authorities seemed to be sympathetic to the Reyes movement, or at least apathetic." Even more brazen, and even less successful, was the plot hatched by Victoriano Huerta and Pascual

45 Knight, Mexican Revolution, II: 376.
46 Francisco Chapa was particularly open in his efforts to help Reyes, shortly after he had been instrumental in mobilizing anti-prohibition voters to support Oscar Colquitt in his successful gubernatorial campaign. Chapa’s business partners in San Antonio also aided the Reyes movement, though they could do nothing to keep the federal government from hounding Reyes for his blatant violations of neutrality laws. See Raat, 244-245; Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall, Texas and the Mexican Revolution: A Study in State and National Border Policy, 1910-1920 (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1984), 17-29. Equally important was Amador Sanchez, Sheriff of Webb County (Laredo), who stored arms for a planned invasion and acted as a go-between for Reyista agents in Mexico and Chapa in San Antonio. See Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution: The Bloodiest Decade, 1910-1920 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 79.
47 Henry Hutchings to Oscar Colquitt, December 1, 1911, File 301-252-6, Oscar B. Colquitt Gubernatorial Papers, Texas State Archives [hereafter TSA], Austin, Texas.
Orozco in 1915. The two plotted loudly in the El Paso area, complete with press coverage of Orozco’s travels to San Antonio, El Paso, and New Orleans to gather support, funds, and arms, but before they could launch their invasion during the summer of 1915 Huerta and many of his co-conspirators were arrested by federal agents. Orozco managed to escape, and remained at large for two months. In August, however, he was ambushed and killed by a posse led by Texas Rangers. His “death was explained to the public as the ultimate justice to be expected by Mexican cattle thieves.”

Huerta died in a Texas prison in January 1916.

No major conspiracies came from South Texas after the deaths of Orozco and Huerta, but exile activity continued well beyond 1915. Radical Magonistas had been active since the late Porfirian years, and despite harsh repression at the hands of local law enforcement and federal agents, their activities continued within exile communities. There was also a seemingly endless stream of secondary factions that waited out parts of the Revolution in the United States, many of them eventually settling permanently. The Cristero Rebellion also

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48 Raat, Revoltosos, 261.
50 This was especially true of former Huertistas, who were never welcomed back. After other factions had laid down their arms and come to a modus vivendi, the taint of Huerta as “usurper” made all of his collaborators untouchable in post-Revolutionary Mexico. The most notorious, and colorful, of these ex-Huertista exiles in San Antonio was Aureliano Urrutia, who had been Diaz’s personal physician and Minister of Gobernacion under Huerta. While a number of legends have grown up around Urrutia (including stories that he cut out the tongue of a Senator who criticized Huerta in a speech, and that he killed General Frederick Funston with a particularly powerful evil eye), we do know that he settled in San Antonio in 1914 and remained there until he died in 1974 at the age of 104. He had a thriving medical practice, owned two palatial homes, and never appeared in public without his opera cape. See “Urrutia, Adolfo and Aureliano” Folder, Vertical
brought a number of exiles into San Antonio. From 1926 to 1929 dozens of archbishops and bishops settled in the city to escape and monitor religious violence in Mexico, while also rallying Catholics in the United States to their cause.51

These conspiracies and plots did not go unnoticed in South Texas, adding to an atmosphere of concern and fear, especially among the Anglo minority. Uncertainty over what was happening in Mexico, who the refugees were, and whether the revolutionary violence would spread into Texas complicated already tense relations. Indeed, throughout the early years of the Revolution small cross-border raids entered South Texas to seize supplies, arms, livestock, and any number of other goods that were in short supply in Northern Mexico. These conditions led to a massive military build-up along the Texas-Mexico border. President William Howard Taft began the build-up in 1911, creating the Maneuver Division, which brought one-fourth of the active duty military to the Texas-Mexico border. The official explanation for this massive troop movement was to aid in the enforcement of neutrality laws, but it also appears to have been the first step toward a possible intervention in Mexican affairs by the United


51 One of the primary boosters for these fund-raising efforts was William F. Buckley, Sr., who was a devout Catholic and held extensive landholdings in Texas and Mexico. Ella Stumpf, interviewed by Esther McMillan, October 23, 1978, ITC; Bailey, Viva Cristo Rey, 120, 143-150, 198-199; F. Arturo Rosales, Pobre Raza: Violence, Justice, and Mobilization among Mexico Lindo Immigrants, 1900-1936 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 44-45. San Antonio was an important center of anti-Calles agitation, and La Prensa, founded in San Antonio by a former Porfirian in 1913, contained so many pro-Catholic columns in 1926 that it was banned in Mexico.
States. The troop build-up peaked in 1916 when the majority of the regular army and all of the National Guard were stationed in Northern Mexico or along the border.

In addition to the massive federal mobilization, state and local officials in Texas sought increased defensive capacities while criticizing what they characterized as federal inaction. Governor Oscar Colquitt was especially vocal in his criticism of the Taft administration, claiming that the federal government did nothing to protect US citizens on either side of the Rio Grande. Colquitt claimed that “scores of women have been outraged by Mexicans,” and that only by forcefully threatening the Mexican factions could the safety of US citizens on either side of the border be guaranteed. Reaction to Colquitt’s statements varied. The Chicago Record-Herald denigrated the governor’s efforts as “gassy patriotism,” while the Dallas News attacked Colquitt’s selective outrage: “The criminal record of Mexico moves him into insulting the President because he will not urge war to redress fewer outrages than are committed by Texans against Texans under the complacent eye of its Governor.” Colquitt also had his defenders, however, such as the New Orleans Times-Democrat, which applauded his declaration that “in the event Mexicans start any trouble we will protect our

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52 Coerver and Hall, Texas and the Mexican Revolution, 23.
53 Ibid., 123.
54 Colquitt quoted in untitled, Denver Weekly, December 6, 1913, May-December 1913 Clippings File, Box 2E205, Oscar Colquitt Papers, Center for American History [hereafter UT-CAH], University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.
citizens and not wait for Washington to act.”56 Likewise, the *Houston Post*
claimed that the “Texas Revolution had for its cause no greater outrages” than the
supposed violence against US citizens by Mexicans on both sides of the border,
continuing the unfortunate Texan habit of relating everything back to the Alamo
and San Jacinto.57

The saber-rattling of Colquitt and others both reflected and influenced the
increasingly tense relations between Anglos and Mexicans throughout South
Texas. Politicians and officials were inundated with pleas for help from
frightened landowners as rumors of shadowy conspiracies among Mexicans and
Mexican Americans spread throughout the region. In June 1911, Ranger Captain
John R. Hughes reported that “during the course of the revolution in Mexico we
had more calls for assistance than we were able to answer. Lawless characters,
both Americans and Mexicans, took advantage of the unsettled conditions along
the border to steal a great many horses and cattle, and commit other depredations,
such as robbing small stores, remote from the railway and having no telephone or
telegraph connections.”58 In reaction to these cross-border raids, Anglos
clamored for protection, often demanding that the state protect their towns or
property with a detachment of Texas Rangers.59

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56 “Texas and Mexico,” *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, November 20, 1913, May-December 1913
Clippings File, Box 2E205, Colquitt Papers, UT-CAH.
57 “Foolish Criticism of Colquitt,” *Houston Post*, March 11, 1914, May-December 1913 Clippings
File, Box 2E205, Colquitt Papers, UT-CAH.
58 John R. Hughes to Henry Hutchings, June 1911, File 301-252-2, Colquitt Papers, TSA.
59 The Texas Rangers, like the Alamo, are so enveloped in mythology that it is often difficult to
disentangle their history from the folklore that grew up around them. In addition, the Rangers
meant very different things to Anglos and Mexicans. On one extreme, State Representative W.W.
Stewart declared in 1919 that the Rangers were, along with the Alamo and San Jacinto, the “three
great monuments to Texas liberty.” Ribb, “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers,” 198.
See also Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin:
frontier defense force in the mid-19th century, acted in the early 20th century as a highly-politicized military force charged with eliminating any sign of political or social dissent, an American version of Díaz’s *rurales*. And it was a military solution that many in South Texas sought as the specter of violence grew in the years after the beginning of the Revolution.

T.W. Dee, whose letterhead identified him as the District Deputy Supreme Dictator for South Texas of the Lodge of the World Loyal Order of the Moose, claimed that all Mexicans in the Kingsville area “spend every cent they can get buying up cartridges and storing them away. If they cannot buy a whole box, they buy a half box.” Another Anglo claimed that Mexicans “are holding meetings

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University of Texas Press, 1935), 3-15. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, however, often viewed the Rangers as a blood-thirsty yet cowardly military force of occupation, who would not hesitate to kill Mexicans, whether innocent or not. The term “rinche,” a local corruption of the word “Ranger,” was a common and important part of the border vocabulary, meant as an epithet that was applied to all armed Anglos that attacked Mexicans. There are a number of works that have dealt with these non-mythic depictions of the Rangers, but the most important is Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958). See also Julian Samora, et al., *Gunpowder Justice: A Reassessment of the Texas Rangers* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

60 The political nature of the Texas Rangers complicated these issues even further. All Rangers served at the sufferance of the governor, which made the force a source of political patronage. When James Ferguson became governor in January 1915, replacing Oscar Colquitt, he immediately moved to put his own men into the Ranger force. While the force had diminished since the late nineteenth century, and had in fact almost disappeared in the first fifteen years of the century, Ferguson halted this trend and installed loyal subordinates as Ranger Captains. His predecessor had only hesitantly granted funding to the Rangers, but Ferguson saw the possibility of political gifts and patronage opportunities in the legendary force. Still, despite the increased demands for Ranger protection during the early years of the Revolution, Ferguson did little to increase the size of the force. The events of 1915 would force him to increase the size and funding of the Rangers, but most importantly Ferguson injected an indisputable partisan nature into the force. While this had been the case to some degree for the life of the Rangers, the 1910s would see the force become fully politicized as a sort of paramilitary arm of the Governor’s House. How the Rangers reacted to groups in South Texas, and especially the Valley, depended on who was in the Governor’s Mansion. During the Ferguson administration, which ended with his impeachment in September 1917, the Rangers continued their long history of aiding the ranching elites of South Texas such as Caesar Kleberg. But Ferguson’s replacement, William Hobby, would again purge the force and fill the captaincies with his own men. During the Hobby administration, the Rangers became even more overtly political, acting as a blunt instrument wielded by the new farming elites against the remnants of the once dominant political machines and their Mexican American supporters.

61 T.W. Dee to J.M. Fox, December 9, 1913, File 301-253-7, Colquitt Papers, TSA.
regularly, going, or on the move night and day and nearly all carrying guns,” and because of these activities, “[o]ur people must be protected. Our women are very much troubled.”

Likewise, the District Attorney for San Antonio, W.C. Linden, warned that, “while I am not an alarmist in any sense of the word, there are too many evidences of a deep-seated intention of a large and powerful organization, composed largely of the criminal classes, who openly say that they hurl defiance at all law and at all authority, to do some atrocious and lawless act in connection with this matter.”

Similarly, Dudley Lansing, a Texas National Guard Officer in San Antonio, reported that “there were in this city, several thousand armed Mexicans, under an acknowledged leader, who were ready to fire the oil tanks east of the city, so as to attract police and fire protection, when they intended to raid the hardware stores.”

There were also related stories of the anarchist International Workers of the World rallying and organizing Mexicans in the Crystal City area, adding to the fears that some sort of outside agitation would lead to violence in South Texas. Whether these stories were fabricated became immaterial as centrifugal forces threatened to pull apart the fragile social institutions that had only partially preserved peace in the past.

These years also laid bare the potential for violence inherent in these momentous social and cultural shifts. One example occurred in 1912 when Alonzo Allee, a white tenant farmer near Laredo, murdered Francisco Gutierrez and his son Manuel, wealthy ranchers who rented land to Allee. The shooting

62 O.H. Grigg to J.M. Woods, November 25, 1913, File 301-253-7, Colquitt Papers, TSA.  
63 W. C. Linden to Oscar Colquitt, December 3, 1913, File 301-253-6, Colquitt Papers, TSA.  
64 Dudley K. Lansing to Henry Hutchings, November 17, 1913, 301-253-5, Colquitt Papers, TSA.  
65 W.T. Gardner to Oscar Colquitt, November 20, 1913, 301-253-5, Colquitt Papers, TSA.  
William H. Davis to Oscar Colquitt, 301-253-5, Colquitt Papers, TSA.
ensued after Allee refused to sign a contract, believing that Gutierrez did not demand the same from his Mexican and Mexican American tenants. Before he shot the father and son, Allee sputtered, “I am as good a man as any Mexican.”

Allee’s father, Alfred, had been a notorious gunman in the vicinity of Laredo and had died sixteen years earlier after a shoot-out with the Laredo city marshal.\textsuperscript{67}

The social prestige of the Allee family, then, did not compare to the respected Gutierrez clan. Still, when Allee went to trial he was represented by three law firms, which the Allee family could not possibly have afforded. It is unclear who paid for Allee’s defense, but it seems likely that the newcomer farming interests saw the Allee case as a means to solidify the growing power of Anglo farmers. By politicizing the justice system, they turned it into an instrument of racial domination. Eighteen potential Spanish-surnamed jurors appeared before the court, but defense attorneys disqualified all of them. The chosen jurors were primarily newcomers to Webb County, and despite evidence of Allee’s guilt he was acquitted for both murders. Allee died four years later after a dispute with Anglo cattlemen in Crystal City, but not before he unwittingly helped shift the balance of power in South Texas even further toward the newcomer farmers who had little interest in coexistence with Mexicans and Mexicans Americans.\textsuperscript{68}

Thus, by 1915 South Texas had all of the preconditions for the outbreak of widespread violence. Economic change created a disfranchised population of

\textsuperscript{66} Testimony of Laureano Gutierrez in Beatriz de la Garza, \textit{A Law for the Lion: A Tale of Crime and Injustice in the Borderlands} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 49.

\textsuperscript{67} Alonzo’s son, Alfred Y. Allee, will be discussed in Chapter 8 and the Epilogue. He was a notorious Texas Ranger and the nemesis of the South Texas Chicano movement. He savagely beat a number of protesters and activists during the Valley Farm Worker Strike in 1966 and 1967.

\textsuperscript{68} Beatriz de la Garza provided a detailed study of this case, tracing the histories of each of the major players in the case, while also delving into the twisted path taken by the Webb County legal system in prosecuting Allee. De la Garza, \textit{A Law for the Lion}. 
Mexican Americans stripped of their autonomy by the two-headed monster of racial animosity and the workings of the market. Political changes also tended to take on racial connotations, as the new farm elite sought to wrest control from the old county machines and their Mexican American voters. The Mexican Revolution then pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees into South Texas. Among these refugees were revolutionaries, political exiles, spies, arms dealers, and other elements who heightened the already heated atmosphere of the region. Finally, the feeling of many Anglos that Mexicans possessed the capacity and willingness to become a fifth column within the United States added an ugly, conspiratorial edge to what was already a powder keg.

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When Basilio Ramos walked from Matamoros, Tamaulipas, to Brownsville, Texas, in January 1915, he brought the spark that would convert this situation from latent violence to an all-out race war. Ramos had grown up in Nuevo Laredo, but had lived a number of years in the United States, graduating from high school in Norman, Oklahoma. He had been a secretary at the customs house in Nuevo Laredo from 1910 to 1914, but the Constitutionalists arrested and imprisoned him when they captured the state of Tamaulipas in the later year.

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69 A full account of the violence that surrounded the Plan de San Diego is beyond the scope of this dissertation. There are a few excellent studies of the Plan, its roots, and its effects. Sandos, Rebellion in the Borderlands, and Sandos, Mexican Revolution and the United States,” both provide an in-depth analysis of the roots of the Plan and the violence that occurred in 1915 and 1916. Johnson, Revolution in Texas, also gives a detailed summary of the violence in South Texas, but also looks at the effects of the Border War, arguing that it caused Tejanos to articulate their American citizenship more clearly as a defense against future racially-motivated violence. Richard Ribb also deals with the Plan in “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers.” Finally, Harris and Sadler, Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution, give an encyclopedic summary of every gunfight during the Border War, but as with all aspects of their book, they maintain an unfortunate unwillingness to jettison the mythology that envelops the Rangers and all of Texas history.

70 Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 72-73.
Upon his release, Ramos went to San Diego, Texas, and remained there until December 1914, when he returned to Mexico despite his Huertista ties. Not surprisingly, the Constitutionalsists arrested him again. Someone smuggled a document known as the Plan de San Diego into the prison in Monterrey that held Ramos and some of his associates, which they signed. The person that smuggled the document into the prison, as well as the Plan’s author, remain unknown, but the document called for an uprising to begin on February 20, 1915 at two o’clock in the morning. Its goal was to achieve the “independence and segregation of the States bordering on the Mexican nation, which are: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Upper California, of which States the Republic of Mexico was robbed in a most perfidious manner by North American imperialism.” The “Liberating Army for Races and Peoples” would welcome those who belonged “to the Latin, the Negro, or the Japanese race,” and would execute all Anglos over the age of sixteen. In addition to breaking off the five southwestern states, the Plan also called for the seizure of six neighboring states to serve as a homeland for African Americans.71 The conspiracy would begin in South Texas.

The Constitutionalsists released Ramos from prison in January, and he left for Texas to spread word of the uprising and form local juntas. He carried with him a copy of the Plan, letters of introduction to individuals believed to be sympathetic to the Plan in a number of South Texas towns, and a pass of safe conduct through the Constitutionalist lines signed by General Emiliano Nafarrate,

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Carranza’s commander along the Texas-Tamaulipas frontier. Ramos went west to McAllen to try and enlist Doctor Andres Villarreal in the Plan, but Villarreal immediately informed the authorities, who arrested Ramos and discovered the papers he carried with him.

Ramos’s arrest gave Texas authorities their first knowledge of the Plan de San Diego, which many Anglos viewed as proof that Mexicans formed a dangerous element within their farming empire that needed to be controlled at all costs and by any means. Anxiety intensified, with South Texans’ worst fears now confirmed. In the context of World War I, moreover, fears of German intrigues

72 Nafarrate has long served as the link some historians have attempted to draw between the Plan de San Diego and Venustiano Carranza. According to this version of the story, Carranza used the border raids of the Plan as a way to force the Wilson administration to recognize his government. In other words, Carranza orchestrated the astounding violence that engulfed South Texas in 1915 and 1916 for his own political gain, using Nafarrate as his local organizer to ensure that their schemes came off as planned. The foremost (and really the only) proponents of this position have recently stated their argument as such: “Why would Carranza sponsor raids into Texas? Because he desperately needed United States diplomatic recognition. At first glance this seems a counterproductive policy, but in reality it was brilliant. . . . He could, and did, argue that Mexican exiles and other malefactors were causing all the trouble and suggest strongly that were he recognized as president he would quickly put a stop to these incursions.” Harris and Sadler, Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution, 252-253. Harris and Sadler have been pushing this same Sisyphean argument for thirty years, and have yet to produce any compelling proof that their counterintuitive argument has any legitimacy and that Carranza had anything to do with the conspiracy. They completely ignored the voluminous proof that Carranza had slight control over many of his subordinates. For instance, a State Department official wrote in April 1915 that “Carranza is reported to have very little authority or control except in his own vicinity. “Information Relating to General Carranza’s Control of His Subordinates,” Box 8, Memorandum I, Gray-Lane Files. Nafarrate did aid the Plan de San Diego raiders, but drawing a direct link from that fact to connivance by Carranza in fomenting a race war distorts far more than it illuminates. It also tends to point toward a potentially much uglier belief that this conspiracy must have had a larger intelligence behind it – while Harris and Sadler soft-pedal the influence of German agents in the development of the irredentist conspiracy, they do seem to discount the ability of local conditions and local people in the Texas-Mexico borderlands to create such an effort. Just as troubling is their assertion that South Texas Anglos’ “attitude was that since the Mexicans were so anxious to wage a war without quarter they would show them what a war without quarter was all about.” Harris and Sadler, 248. This inane breed of John-Wayne-like swaggering belligerence, while not quite celebrating the horrific violence that occurred during these years, overwhelms their entire study and makes it little more than a barely updated version of Walter Prescott Webb’s mythic telling of the Rangers. Their research is prodigious, but the uses they put it to are unfortunate.

within the US became entangled in rumors of Mexican conspiracies.\textsuperscript{74} When the date of the proposed uprising came and went without any violence, however, tensions abated and talk of the Plan changed from terror to mocking.\textsuperscript{75} When Ramos stood trial in May on charges of sedition at the Brownsville federal court, the judge ridiculed the prospects of such an uprising, and declared that the defendant “ought to be tried for lunacy, not [for] conspiring against the United States.”\textsuperscript{76} Ramos posted bail, went back to Mexico, and disappeared from the historical record.

The fragile peace continued until July 4, 1915, when the Border War began in earnest.\textsuperscript{77} On that day, a band of approximately forty armed, mounted

\textsuperscript{74} The Zimmerman Telegram, which made a proposal to Carranza similar to the Plan de San Diego, was used as proof of German-Mexican connivance when it was discovered in 1917, but no historians still agree that Germany had anything to do with the Plan. In his study of German-Mexican relations during the Revolution, Friedrich Katz noted that the Plan “certainly is the type of plot the Germans would have liked to be involved in,” but he found no evidence that there was any connection. Katz, Secret War in Mexico, 341. Anglos also saw signs of pro-German sentiment among Mexicans and Mexican Americans when large numbers of Valley residents fled to Mexico in 1917. While this exodus was caused by a combination of Ranger-led violence and unwillingness to be drafted into the US Army, many saw it as \textit{prima facie} evidence that Mexicans were not reliable American citizens. The investigation into the activities of the Texas Rangers led by Jose Tomas Canales in 1919 featured an almost constant barrage of assertions by Ranger supporters that Mexicans brought much of the violence on themselves by not living up to the standards of American citizenship. See “Proceedings of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House on the Investigation of the Texas State Ranger Force,” 36th Legislature, Regular Session (January 14-March 19, 1919), Harbert Davenport Papers, TSA, 345-347, 467-469, 481-510. [\textit{Hereafter Ranger Investigation}].

\textsuperscript{75} A revised version of the Plan appeared on February 20, which clarified many of the generalities of the first document. It called for the war to begin in Texas, and then move on from there. It also put the fight in class-based terms, using the term “proletarian” to describe the allies of the Plan. Additionally, issues of land and labor became more central to the document, joining the original’s obvious basis in racial solidarity. The ends of the Plan remained the same.

\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 74.

\textsuperscript{77} I will refer to the violence of 1915 and 1916 as the Border War for a few reasons. First, the alternatives are problematic. Referring to the entire episode as the Plan de San Diego can distort the importance of that conspiracy for the violence that ensued. While the Plan was clearly an important impetus for the race war that ensued, using its name to denote these struggles could be seen as ignoring the reactionary violence launched by Anglo vigilantes and law enforcement officials. The problems with “the Bandit War,” preferred by Harris and Sadler, should be clear. Second, it identifies the importance of the border and the borderlands in the uprising and subsequent suppression. Third, it correctly identifies the violence as a legitimate “war,” in which thousands were killed in a matter of months and an even greater number abandoned large swaths
Mexicans raided the Los Indios Ranch in Cameron County, beginning two weeks of periodic attacks from this single group of raiders. The first confirmed death occurred on July 9, when a foreman of the Norias Division of the King Ranch killed one raider. Three days later, two Mexican American police officers were shot at a dance near Brownsville: one was killed and the other badly wounded. Federal investigators argued that "the Mexican officers knew of the plans of their fellows before the real beginning of the operations and that this was the cause of the several efforts to assassinate them." Over the next two weeks attacks continued to occur throughout Cameron and Hidalgo counties. Reports of attacks on police officers, raids on ranches and stores, and attempted assassinations of landowners cropped up every few days.

The raids entered a more daring phase toward the end of July, and they inspired a more thorough and random counterattack from law enforcement and vigilantes. On July 25 a band of mounted raiders burned a bridge of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railroad and cut telegraph wires near Harlingen. The raiders not only sought to isolate the Lower Valley by cutting its transportation and communication links to the rest of the state, but also attacked a clear symbol of the new order that came to South Texas with the entry of the railroad. A few days earlier, Governor Ferguson sent Ranger Harry Ransom to

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78 "Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas," Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
79 "Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas," Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
80 See Adjutant General Department, General Correspondence, Files 401-550-11 to 401-550-22 and 401-551-3 to 401-551-21, TSA.
the Lower Valley to lead a pacification campaign. Ransom was in his third tour of duty with the Rangers (the first two in 1905 and 1909), but he rejoined the force after stints as a guard on a state prison farm and Chief of Police of Houston. He left his position in Houston after killing a defense attorney. Ferguson hired him after he successfully appealed his conviction in the murder case. Ransom stocked his Ranger Company with other former prison guards, and they went to the Lower Valley as an officially-sanctioned assassination squad that turned the limited violence of the first few weeks of the Border War into a scorched-earth campaign of annihilation. Ransom declared that a “bad disease calls for bitter medicine. The Governor sent me down here to stop this trouble, and I am going to carry out his orders. There is only one way to do it. President Díaz proved that.” While Ransom and his men did not commit all of the atrocities that occurred over the next several months in the Lower Valley, they instigated this type of violence and reflected the willingness of much of the Anglo minority to use extreme methods to ensure domination at all costs. In addition, some justified this violent counterattack as a reckoning for past “crimes.” “Somehow,” wrote one South Texan, “I have never been satisfied with the Alamo and Goliad events, and always have felt that there was something yet due the

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81 Harris and Sadler, *Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution*, 555.
82 Ribb, “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers,” 92.
83 Quoted in Ibid., 92.
84 Not surprisingly, Harris and Sadler argued that Ransom was the exception rather than the rule. They blame his actions on personal defects and the politicization of the Rangers by Ferguson, ignoring the long history of such actions by the Rangers. Further, Ransom was far from the only Ranger Captain whose company became roving death squads during the Border War. Again, Harris and Sadler appear unwilling to give up the old Ranger myth. They throw Ransom under the train, but neglect to indict the rest of the Rangers for the same shortcomings.
Mexicans from us, and if there is a second call and for a war, the Mexicans will certainly get what is due them from the Texans."^{85}

Coming on the heels of the events of the previous week, the lynching of Adolfo Muñoz on July 29 took on enormous significance. Farmers in San Benito accused Muñoz of scheming to rob a local bank and having connections with the armed raiders that had been active in the area since the beginning of that month.^{86} Cameron County Deputy Sheriff Frank Carr and Ranger Daniel Hinojosa arrested Muñoz and loaded him in a car to drive from San Benito to Brownsville. The officers alleged that two miles outside of San Benito eight armed, masked men stopped their car and forced them to turn over Muñoz to them. The next day, Muñoz’s corpse, riddled with bullets, hung from a tree along the road between San Benito and Brownsville.^{87} Whether he had been killed by vigilantes or the Rangers had created the story to divert attention from their extra-legal murder, Muñoz’s death marked a turning point. His spectacle lynching seemed to embolden vigilantes and law enforcement, while it had a chilling effect on Mexicans and Mexican Americans. According to J.T. Canales, “every person who was charged with a crime refused to be arrested, because they did not believe that the officers of the law would give them the protection guaranteed them by the Constitution and the laws of this State.”^{88} While this sort of extra-legal killing

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^{85} Joseph Nichols to Henry Hutchings, May 13, 1916, File 401-554-18, TSA.
^{86} Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 86. The State Department records and Johnson refer to Adolfo Muñoz, but Ribb refers to him as Rodolfo Muñiz. For sake of clarity, I will use Adolfo Muñoz, though it would certainly not be outside of the realm of possibility that the federal government misspelled his name.
^{87} J.T. Canales also pointed out that Muñoz had been arrested earlier in the day, but kept in San Benito until nightfall. Thus, he claimed that Carr and Hinojosa had killed Muñoz and fabricated their story about masked vigilantes. “Ranger Investigation,” 27-28.
^{88} Ibid., 859.
had long been known as “rangering” or a “rinchada,” the specter of these random murders grew to a scale beyond anything seen in South Texas in decades (or possibly ever). Conversely, William G.B. Morrison, a lawyer in San Benito, described the lynching as “the spark that fired the flame among the white people.” 89 A federal investigator, however, saw the lynching as “an expression of the indignation of the people against the repeated failure to enforce the laws.” 90 Despite these obvious differences in opinion, all saw Muñoz’s murder as an important intensification of the violence, as Anglo law enforcement and vigilantes continued to kill with impunity while more Mexicans and Mexican Americans refused to cooperate with people they now viewed rightly as potential, even probable, executioners.

Personal conflicts fueled some of this violence. The most important, though by no means the only, example of personal conflicts taking on added significance occurred on August 3, 1915, at Los Tulitos Ranch in Cameron County. Aniceto Pizaña owned Los Tulitos. His neighbor, Jeff Scrivener, had long coveted Pizaña’s land. 91 No evidence has ever connected Pizaña to the first month of raiding, but Scrivener informed military and law enforcement officials that Pizaña harbored an armed band. In response, a posse of about thirty Rangers, Deputy Sheriffs, and others launched an attack on Pizaña’s home. In the firefight

89 Ibid., 28.
90 “Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas,” Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
91 Brownsville attorney Harbert Davenport asserted that the conflict between Pizaña and Scrivener could have been due to competing cattle rustling operations, though I know of no other evidence for this assertion. Ribb, “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers,” 98. Later, police found the corpses of twenty Mexicans buried on Scrivener’s property. It is not clear whether Scrivener or the Rangers were responsible for these bodies. H.J. Kirk, “Ranger Investigation,” 599-604.
that ensued, Pizaña escaped, Pizaña’s son was shot in the leg, his brother was
arrested, one soldier was killed, and two Sheriff’s deputies were injured.92

In the aftermath of this attack, Pizaña followed his friend Luis de la Rosa
into active participation in the Plan de San Diego. De la Rosa had owned a small
general store in Rio Hondo, north of Brownsville, but when police arrested him in
early 1915 for slaughtering stolen cattle, he decided to leave South Texas instead
of continue suffering abuse at the hands of Anglo law enforcement. He moved
his family to Matamoros and joined the Plan de San Diego conspiracy. A few
days before the attack on Los Tulitos, he had written Pizaña, asking that he join
the conspiracy too.93 Before the attack, however, Pizaña had too much to lose in
aiding the raiders. That changed on August 3, and thereafter Pizaña and De la
Rosa would be the primary military leaders of the Plan.94

The Muñoz lynching and the Los Tulitos attack transformed the Plan de
San Diego from a cross-border conspiracy into a South Texas rebellion. The first
conspirators and raiders, such as Ramos and his associates, had been Mexican, but
as the violence continued more and more Tejanos appear to have joined in the
raiding. The nature of these bands makes it difficult to assert any definitive
conclusions about their composition, but the wanton violence of Anglo vigilantes
and law enforcement seems to have pushed many into league with the borderland

92 Aniceto’s brother, Ramon, went on trial for murder, but was acquitted on grounds of self­
defense. Canales served as his defense attorney.
94 América Paredes referred to the Border War as the Pizaña Uprising, showing the prominence of
Pizaña in the later stages of the violence. Likewise, federal investigators viewed Pizaña and De la
Rosa as the primary masterminds of the uprising, in spite of their lack of involvement in the initial
planning by individuals like Basilio Ramos. Paredes, With His Gun in His Hand, 26.
revolutionaries that launched the conspiracy. An escalating cycle of reprisal killings resulted.

The first of these revenge killings occurred just three days after the attack on Pizaña's ranch, on August 6. De la Rosa led a band which murdered A.L. Austin and his son Charles in the town of Sebastian. Austin had recently moved with his son to Sebastian, a new town established in the wake of the entry of the railroad and the beginning of the land boom, to participate in the burgeoning agricultural empire. He served as President of the Law and Order League which, according to federal investigators, "had driven several bad men out of that section."95 Austin gained a reputation as a brutal racist, making him an obvious target for raiders. There is no evidence that he participated in any of the vigilante violence that preceded his murder, but groups like the Sebastian Law and Order League formed an important component of the private forces, so his murder served as a symbolic attack on these groups.

Not surprisingly, the reaction to the Austin killings was swift. By the next day posses had killed several Mexicans unlucky enough to be in the vicinity. A party led by Adjutant General Hutchings and Captain Ransom alone killed three Mexicans, while a number of other bands took advantage of the open season created by the Austin killings to massacre others.96 These reprisals occurred at the same time that raiders stepped up attacks on railroad and irrigation facilities throughout the Valley. They tore up tracks, burned railroad bridges, and attacked

95 "Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas," Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
96 "Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas," Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
repair crews, ratcheting up the fear of some Anglos that the raiders would be able
to isolate the Valley from the rest of the state and then carry out the genocide
promised by the Plan de San Diego.

On August 9, the most daring attack yet occurred, when sixty or seventy
raiders attacked the Norias Division of the King Ranch.97 Again, the symbolic
importance of this attack was clear: the King Ranch had long been a hated symbol
of Anglo land thievery. Three raiders died in the ensuing battle. Texas Rangers
arrived at the ranch after the fighting finished. The next morning they tied the
corpses of the raiders to their horses, dragged them through the brush, and
deposited them in a clearing. The Rangers, J.M. Fox and Frank Hamer, then
posed with the corpses for a photograph, which was widely reproduced as a
picture postcard throughout South Texas and Northern Mexico.98 Within the
context of the times, as Richard Ribb has argued, this photo evoked the same
lessons of racially-motivated violence as spectacle lynchings.99 The Rangers
sought to document their violent solution for “banditry,” in spite of the fact that
they had not been at Norias during the gun battle. Fox and Hamer had left Norias
half an hour before the raiders arrived, and did not return until the battle finished.
One of the Norias defenders demanded that the Rangers pursue the retreating
raiders, but instead they waited until after they had their photo opportunity the
next morning to chase the raiders, by which time they had crossed back to

97 “Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6th and October 29th, 1915 in the Lower
Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas,” Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
98 J.W. Berkshire to Commissioner-General of Immigration, October 4, 1915, File 532108/71O,
Box 1112, RG 85, USNA. Berkshire wrote that many in Northern Mexico believed that the
distribution of the postcard throughout Northern Mexico explained the increased ferocity of
attacks in August.
Mexico.\textsuperscript{100} Thus, as América Paredes argued years ago, the Rangers were far better self-promoters than they were law officers.\textsuperscript{101}

Violence continued to accelerate during August and September, with almost daily killings and systematic attacks on railroad facilities, irrigation works, and even army detachments posted near the Rio Grande. Probably the most frightening attack of all, however, occurred on October 19, when a band of raiders derailed a passenger train six miles north of Brownsville. “The Bandits went through the train shooting all Americans,” according to a federal investigator.\textsuperscript{102} They did not attack Mexicans and Mexican Americans, which many took as incontrovertible proof that non-Anglos were all in on the Plan de San Diego.

Again, the counterattack was swift and deadly, with unknown numbers caught up in the blind vengeance of law enforcement and vigilantes. In the immediate vicinity of the crash, Rangers captured four Mexicans. Captain Ransom walked them into the brush and shot them in the back, after asking Cameron County Sheriff W.T. Vann if he wanted to join him in what Ransom clearly considered a joy killing.\textsuperscript{103} Additionally, according to R.B. Creager, a lawyer in Brownsville, blacklists circulated throughout the Anglo communities of the Valley, “and the name of any Mexican who was suspicioned [sic] by any men of standing in the valley or even half way standing who would report the fact that a certain Mexican was a bad Mexican would be placed upon one of those lists and it was a common rumor and report, and it was true, that in most instances that Mexican would

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 322.
\textsuperscript{101} Paredes, \textit{With His Pistol in His Hand}, 24.
\textsuperscript{102} “Chronological List of Raids and Outrages between July 6\textsuperscript{th} and October 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1915 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Section of Texas,” Box 1, Memorandum 11, Gray-Lane Files.
\textsuperscript{103} W.T. Vann, “Ranger Investigation,” 574-575.
disappear.” The Adjutant General’s office received a flood of letters and telegrams from would-be vigilantes volunteering to join the fight against the raiders, with swaggering claims that “we will have them planting dead Mexicans for weeks.”

The cross-border raids slowed by December 1915, then revived during the summer of 1916 in the vicinity of Laredo. But these raids were overshadowed by the ferocity of the counterattacks that followed. These counterattacks inspired many Mexicans and Mexican Americans to flee the Valley by escaping south to Mexico, in spite of the Revolution. The San Antonio Light reported that “2000 have left Texas through fear of sudden death.” It went on to state, “In outlying sections away from towns, suspicion is still so great that Mexicans found out alone at night might as well be dead, and a Mexican seen on horseback with a gun or rifle at any time of the day is in danger of death.” A few days later, the Light also reported that “some authorities have allowed Mexicans’ bodies to lie where they were shot so that their friends might find them and profit by this warning.”

The next day, the same paper reported that a “strong force in restoring quiet appears to be the stoppage of indiscriminate killing of Mexicans which has been

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105 Claude Adams to Henry Hutchings, September 6, 1915, File 401-551-11, TSA.
106 E.P. Reynolds to Supervising Inspector, December 2, 1915, File 5310871P, Box 1112, RG 85, USNA; James E. Trout (Laredo Inspector in Charge) to Supervising Inspector, June 13, 1916, File 541252/79A, Box 64, RG 85, USNA. The State Department continued to trace the activities of Pizaña and De la Rosa. “Activities of Luis de la Rosa,” no date, Box 7, Memorandum 69, Gray-Lane Files.
107 “Mexicans Flee from Border to Mexico Side,” San Antonio Light, September 11, 1915.
charged against some peace officers. No violent deaths of Mexicans without the semblance of legal formalities have been reported for several days.”

The counterattack, then, sought nothing less than ethnic cleansing. One Valley resident later recalled that during “those troubles, one good citizen – a lawyer who held high places in the judiciary of Texas – suggested to me that we ought to compel all Mexicans resident on the Border to go across the river until the troubles were over, and then go out and shoot all that were left.” While this proposal was never put into practice, the Texas Rangers led what appeared to be a systematic effort to rid large portions of South Texas of Mexicans through wholesale, anonymous murder. The Plan de San Diego raids provided the excuse for this violent reaction, but it did not create the situation, nor did the end of large-scale raiding across the Rio Grande bring an end to vigilante and law enforcement violence. In April and May 1916 law enforcement learned of a plan to launch an attack on San Antonio. Luis de la Rosa’s cousin recruited Jose Morin, a former Villista and Constitutionalist General in exile in Texas, to launch a new attack on San Antonio, cutting rail and telegraph links before burning the city. Victoriano Ponce, a baker in Kingsville, informed officials about Morin’s activities, but a federal agent arrested them both in Kingsville in May. The sheriff of Willacy County took both men from the prison in Kingsville and surrendered them to

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110 “All is Quiet on Mexican Border,” San Antonio Light, September 22, 1915.
111 Harbert Davenport, as quoted in Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 124.
112 Charles Warren (Assistant Attorney General) to L.S. Rowe (Department of State), August 29, 1916, Box 2, Memorandum 44, Gray-Lane Files.
Captain J.J. Sanders's Ranger Company. Morin and Ponce disappeared, two more victims of "rangering."  

Peace began to return to South Texas by the end of 1915. War fatigue on all sides probably helped diminish the violence. The most powerful force opposing the indiscriminate killing of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, however, appears to have been the large landholders who needed labor for their farms. Commerce came to a screeching halt in mid-1915, and for the new farm elite the lack of a labor pool soon trumped concerns over the Plan de San Diego raids. By putting pressure on state officials, land barons were able to tame the savagery of the Texas Rangers and local law enforcement, putting an end to the worst of the slaughter by December 1915, but not before thousands had been killed in a matter of months and untold thousands more had been driven from their homes. Despite the cessation of violence, however, the hopes for Anglo-Mexican accommodation, even on the skewed terms that had existed in previous decades, disappeared. As Benjamin Johnson noted in his study of the Plan de San Diego, "Texas Rangers and vigilantes not on the state payroll accomplished in months what it might have taken years of economic pressure and more sporadic violence to wrest from Tejanos."  

South Texas reemerged from the Border War vastly different than before.  

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114 Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 144. It is worth noting that, in addition to the regular Rangers, a group known as the Special Rangers also formed during these years. They served without pay, but were deputized as Rangers and therefore were able to act with impunity during the Border War. A number of these Special Rangers gained handsomely from the Border War, taking advantage of the violence to seize the land of dead and departing Mexicans and Tejanos. Lon Hill, "Ranger Investigation," 1145-1161.
The Plan de San Diego and the Border War have always elicited the same question from historians. How could the adherents of the Plan possibly hope to accomplish their goals? For most, it looks like the "most bizarre irredentist conspiracy in American history" or a suicidal attempt to foment a race war in the United States. When placed within the context of the Mexican Revolution and the momentous changes wrought by the entry of the railroad into the Lower Rio Grande Valley, however, these events take on a new meaning and importance. The Plan may still seem quixotic, but the motive forces behind it begin to emerge only after teasing out the tangled strands of the society that straddled the Rio Grande. The complexity of this situation can be maddening and difficult to boil down to simplistic notions that fit within the pervasive mythology of Texas history or the strictures of nationalist history, but it points toward the essential linkages between the histories of the US and Mexico at the same time that it provides an alternative vision of a past drowned in blood.

The Plan de San Diego and the Border War occurred because Mexican and Mexican American rebels, who had seen their own society displaced and marginalized by the rapidly changing economic order on both sides of the border, sought to extend into Texas the revolutionary changes taking place just across the river in Mexico. Conversely, the Anglo migrants coming to Texas from the north brought their own ideas of revolutionary change with them. They sought to seize political and economic control from the tottering old regime of South Texas. These two clashing visions were both introduced into South Texas after 1905. All of the changes that occurred within South Texas during the Revolution and in the

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115 Harris and Sadler, Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution, 210.
coming decades flowed out of this clash. The victory of the Anglo vision for South Texas was far from assured, but the overwhelming force of law enforcement and Anglo vigilantes crushed the hopes for an alternative society to develop in South Texas.

The violence of the Mexican Revolution, the wave of refugees that it created, the economic changes in South Texas, and the Border War cannot be understood independently. Together, they provide an explanation for the momentous changes that turned South Texas on its head in the first twenty years of the twentieth century. Gone was the gradual change of the late nineteenth century, replaced by sweeping, violent upheaval that grafted capitalist agriculture more firmly onto South Texas and dissolved what was left of inter-ethnic accommodation in the region.

The revolution in Texas could now begin.
Chapter 3: The Revolution in Texas: International Migration, Capitalist Agriculture, and the Growth of the Tejano Diaspora

“We have got beyond soiling our hands and we want somebody else to do the real work.”

John Davis, Laredo, Texas, cotton farmer

Trainloads of prospective buyers and home seekers, derisively referred to as “home suckers” by those in South Texas, headed south for the Rio Grande Valley in search of land that had been too desolate and unproductive for large-scale agricultural production only a few years earlier. Drawn by speculators’ and irrigation companies’ claims of open land and fabulous wealth, these caravans left regularly from the cities of the East and Midwest during winter. Many a snake-oil salesman and huckster found employment enticing farmers south to the burgeoning agricultural region.

While the organizers of these journeys counted on rising temperatures to tempt winter-weary farmers to invest in the Rio Grande Valley, they also realized that the sparse and forbidding landscape of much of Texas, especially the cattle ranches north of the Valley through which all of these trains had to pass, posed a potential problem. A few enterprising organizers of these trips developed a sure-fire method for distracting the potential buyers that soon became an industry standard. Whenever the trains passed through particularly ugly landscapes, land company employees called for prayer meetings. They closed window shades and led group prayers and the singing of hymns. The meetings ended and the shades came off the windows when the worst views had passed.²

Once they arrived in the Rio Grande Valley, the land parties began. The prospective buyers would travel to land company holdings, and local teenagers would drive them around to view the different properties. One of these makeshift chauffeurs recalled, "It was not difficult to sell these people land. You brought 'em down here; they came down here out of the snow and ice. Most of this was done in the winter time. You'd go and let 'em pick an orange or two off of a tree; let 'em look at the palm trees. You'd take 'em across the river and feed 'em in Mexico. Show 'em the onions growin', the cabbages, and all the vegetables growin'. They'd fall over themselves buying land."\(^3\) The results of these land parties and aggressive marketing of South Texas land was a massive migration of people and capital from the north that met the growing immigrant population in the region south of San Antonio. As a result, the populations of agricultural areas like Cameron, Hidalgo, Zavala, and Dimmit counties grew rapidly from 1910 until the outbreak of the Great Depression, while towns appeared almost overnight throughout South Texas to provide population and transportation centers throughout the new farm belt.

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This chapter will examine the long-term effects of the Revolution on the border region, South Texas, and the United States as a whole. The entry of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans during and after the Revolution introduced an enormous, exploitable labor pool to South Texas and the rest of the Southwest. These migrants entered the region at the same time that newcomer farm interests

\(^3\) Max Dreyer, interviewed by Joan Ballard and Sid Ballard, December 1987, Oral History Program, Institute of Texan Cultures Library, San Antonio, Texas.
descended on South Texas from the Midwest and Southeast. These simultaneous population shifts allowed for the explosive growth of the agricultural economy that began in the mid-1910s and continued, despite depressed conditions elsewhere, into the 1930s. Agricultural (and some industrial) interests in the rest of the United States watched this spectacular growth fueled by labor surpluses and low wages and sought to draw much of this labor force away from the border region, helping to create a nationwide migrant labor stream. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and the cataclysmic violence of the Plan de San Diego, a farming empire developed in South Texas that was fed by continued immigration from Mexico. This stream of workers entering South Texas spawned a nationwide migrant labor stream that formed an essential building block for agribusiness throughout the United States.

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While the Plan de San Diego and the Border War that followed it were the most extreme manifestations of the Mexican Revolution in South Texas, equally (if not more) important was the rapid economic development made possible by the refugees from wartorn Mexico. The refugee population entered into a fledgling agricultural economy and these migrants helped build the agricultural empires of South Texas, changing the endless stretches of scrub brush that covered the semi-arid vastness of the region south of San Antonio into an irrigated boom area. Early farming successes attracted huge amounts of outside investment into the previously isolated, worthless land north of the Rio Grande. While this growth was partially dependent on the entry of the railroad into the
Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1904 and the impetus it gave to the construction of irrigation facilities throughout the region, the entry of the new labor pool from Mexico was every bit as important, if not much more so. The combination of railroad, capital growth, and migrant labor force happened roughly simultaneously in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the Winter Garden. Other boom agricultural areas in South Texas, such as the Laredo and Corpus Christi regions, possessed rail links decades earlier but lacked the necessary surplus labor pool. Mexican immigrants were the final necessary ingredient for the creation of a thriving agricultural economy.

Labor migration from Mexico was not a new phenomenon of the revolutionary era. Immigration officials, border residents, and agriculturalists already viewed Mexican labor as “a natural supply of labor for the Southwest.”\(^4\) The difference lay in the scale of this population movement during the two decades following the outbreak of the Revolution, and the uses to which these immigrants could be put now that the other prerequisites for large-scale agriculture existed in the border region. A Customs Inspector in the Lower Rio Grande Valley clearly understood the relationship between Mexican immigration and South Texas agriculture when he reported on conditions in the fall of 1913: “practically the entire population of Northern Tamaulipas, opposite the counties of Cameron, Starr, and Hidalgo, in the State of Texas, (something between five and seven thousand people), are and have been sojourning in the United States

since about the first of June, on account of conditions existing in that part of Mexico at the present time.” He continued, “It is true that in the lower Rio Grande valley of Texas, on account of the immense irrigation projects and agricultural interests, there has been a great deal of work.” He worried, however, that the same pressures for migration existed further west along the Texas-Mexico border without the same opportunities for farm labor employment, creating the potential for a large number of idle refugees. “There is very little of farming interests along the Rio Grande, except in the lower valley, consequently the Western part of the State has no opportunity for using cheap labor.” As the inspector observed, the refugee population was spreading beyond the Lower Valley and into the region west of Laredo along the Texas-Mexico border. He worried that lack of employment opportunities would only exacerbate problems of destitution for these immigrants, but he failed to recognize that these potential laborers would build the agricultural economy in the Winter Garden region to the west of Laredo from the ground up.

In fact, by 1913, agricultural growth was already in its early stages in the Winter Garden. Only one year earlier, in the vicinity of Asherton, Mexican American onion clippers called a strike for higher wages. The Carrizo Springs Javelin reported that some “Asherton Mexicans got the idea that onion clipping was skilled labor, and that they ought to be fashionable and strike. Likewise they thought they had the onion growers where they couldn’t kick. The onion raisers couldn’t see the raise. They offered to come through with half the extra money,

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5 Customs Inspector George Head to Commissioner-General of Immigration, October 28, 1913, File 53108/71H, Box 1111, Record Group 85, USNA.
but the clippers said it was a whole loaf or no crust, and they were pretty crusty about it too. The onion men simply sent out for more Mexicans, and now the former clippers are in the soup, no money, no job, and no strike fund in the treasury.⁶ Even if the customs inspector did not realize it, the farmers of South Texas had already begun to tap into the new group of immigrants as a source of cheap labor and, in this case, as potential strikebreakers.⁷

Determining the total number of migrants that entered the area is problematic, however. The total population growth of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas can only be shown impressionistically, as census data from the first half of the twentieth century are so flawed as to be almost useless. The first problem, which continued throughout much of the Twentieth Century, was the socially marginal position of many Mexicans and Mexican Americans within the United States that made accurate census enumerations difficult if not impossible. The second problem lies in the fact that Mexican/Mexican American did not become a separate category until 1930. The censuses of 1910 and 1920, which still maintained strict bi-racial enumerations, counted Mexicans and Mexican Americans as “foreign born whites whose country of birth was

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⁶ Carrizo Springs Javelin, April 27, 1912, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.

⁷ Around the same time, the Immigration Service began investigating a coal miners’ strike in Colorado. Miners claimed that “strike-breakers are being brought into Colorado from detention camps along the Mexican Border.” Inspector J.W. Berkshire, always seemingly willing to ignore violations of immigration law under the right circumstances, stated that there appeared to be shipments of Mexicans from El Paso to Colorado during these years, but could find no more. Berkshire to Commission-General of Immigration, November 29, 1913, File 53108/711, Box 1111, Record Group 85, USNA.
Mexico.” This distinction meant, at least in theory, that all immigrants and their children fell under this distinction, while all others were classified as native-born whites. These classifications changed in 1930, when a separate ethnic category of Mexican appeared, defined as “all persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico, who are not definitely white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese.”

But again, this system of classification differentiated between first and second generation populations and those who had been in the United States longer, divided haphazardly according to ill-defined distinctions and the racial notions of individual census takers who very well could have applied whiteness to individuals and families according to notions of class or acculturation rather than the stated vague criteria.

The numbers for these years, as a result, are more useful for determining patterns than for giving definitive data. The 1910 Census recorded 135,232 Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas, or thirty seven percent of the population. According to the 1930 Census, the Mexican population in South Texas had more than doubled since 1910, with 371,486 Mexicans and Mexican Americans making up forty six percent of the population. Just as importantly, the Mexican American population in South Texas had spread out from the border counties, especially into the San Antonio area and the Winter Garden district of

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10 Arreola, Tejano South Texas, 45; Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910.
Dimmit and Zavala Counties.\textsuperscript{12} In 1910 only the eleven counties along the border contained majority Mexican and Mexican American populations. By 1930, however, several additional counties away from the border contained majority Mexican and Mexican American populations, while no county in the region had a Chicano population that made up less than a quarter of the total population.

Again, these numbers are certainly undercounts, but they do provide insight into the broad outlines of demographic trends during the first two decades after the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution and the onset of large-scale emigration from Mexico to the United States.

The majority of immigrants entering the United States from Mexico came to Texas. Not until the 1930s would more Mexicans enter the United States along California’s border, and not until the second half of the Twentieth Century would the majority of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States live outside of Texas.\textsuperscript{13} In the late 1920s, a fact-finding committee appointed by Governor C.C. Young of California wrote a report on Mexican immigrants in California. It found that between 1909 and 1926 the vast majority of Mexican immigrants (64-84\%) declared Texas to be their “intended future permanent residence.”\textsuperscript{14} While the growth of a resident Mexican and Mexican American population and the birth of intensive agricultural enterprises occurred at roughly the same time in Texas and California, the sheer numbers entering Texas created

\textsuperscript{12} Arreola, \textit{Tejano South Texas}, 45-55.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{14} George J. Sanchez, \textit{Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 65. Of the immigrants who arrived between 1909 and 1911, 3.8\% declared a desire to settle in California, and this increased to only 17\% in the years 1924-1926.
different dynamics than in California. While California agriculture relied on some migrant workers, South Texas relied wholly on the floating agricultural workforce that emerged from Mexico and formed an interstate migrant stream that began and ended in the region south of San Antonio.

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South Texas had been a tall-grass land before the cattle industry reached its peak in the 1880s. Overgrazing thinned the grass and allowed mesquite and other shrubs to dominate the landscape. By 1910 much of South Texas was brush land dominated by mesquite, huisache, and cactus that had to be grubbed out by hand in order to prepare the land for farming. Thus, as ranching gave way to farming and immigrants from Mexico sought some form of labor north of the Rio Grande, many went to work clearing vast tracts of troublesome vegetation. Using flamethrowers and grub hoes to uproot and destroy the shrubs, these workers performed the necessary first steps in preparing the land for intensive agriculture. According to Colonel Sam Robertson, a railroad and irrigation impresario in San Benito in Cameron County much given to hyperbole, “I do not know of any other race that could have stood the tick-infested jungles

18 Ibid., 4.
that covered the land when I built the railroad into it." Clearing was still done by hand even after the introduction of tractors and mechanical plows, largely because landowners feared damaging their machinery and because hand labor remained cheaper. For their troubles, these workers received wages even lower than contemporary railroad and farm laborers, stuck as they were in what was unquestionably the bottom rung of the occupational ladder. In 1914 and 1915, for example, these laborers earned $110.05 in total wages for clearing vegetation from fifty-nine-acre properties worth seventeen thousand dollars each.

With the vegetation gone, the land had to be leveled for irrigation. This leveling was also performed by contract labor at extraordinarily low wages. And like the process of clearing the land, leveling drastically increased land values. Once the land had been leveled, it could be provided with the irrigation water controlled by the numerous irrigation companies that multiplied throughout South Texas. In 1909, irrigation reached 54,000 acres of farmland in Hidalgo and Cameron counties. By 1919, 228,000 acres received water from irrigation companies, while the area of coverage spread beyond the immediate vicinity of the Rio Grande. Irrigation reached 338,000 acres of South Texas land by 1929.

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20 Sam Robertson, quoted in "Exodus Across Border Will Create Acute Labor Shortage for Planters – Mexico Liable to Retaliate with Boycott," San Antonio Express, October 20, 1929.
22 Emilio Zamora, The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 33.
23 The Rio Grande remained the main source of water for the border counties, but secondary rivers and subterranean limestone reservoirs that lie beneath the region were important for farms further removed from the border. "Survey of the Underground Waters of Texas," February 16, 1931, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 35, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley; Willard, Status of Farming in the Lower Rio Grande Irrigated District of Texas, 20-21.
now reaching even further north and west from the Lower Rio Grande Valley.\textsuperscript{24} The rapid growth of land suited to intensive agriculture was made possible by a continual process of clearing and leveling done almost entirely by common laborers recently arrived from Mexico, with mechanization not providing a replacement until the 1920s. Many South Texas growers, however, continued to use hand labor well past the 1920s since it remained cheaper than machines.

Cleared land and irrigation pumps were of little intrinsic value without the continuing presence of a large labor force capable of transforming the theoretical wealth of prepared land into marketable crops. Migrants from Mexico arrived as a fortuitous \textit{deus ex machina} for those looking to make the transition to farming. Increased migration from Mexico strengthened the pull on prospective farmers who came to South Texas seeking cheap land, more plentiful cheap labor, and the chance to make more money than was believed possible in the older farm areas they left. Not surprisingly, land speculators also joined in this free-for-all. “Railroads and land companies put on a shrill campaign to advertise the fortunes to be made,” wrote D.W. Meinig. “As a result the area was populated and developed more by newcomers from the North than by Texans from nearby; its colonization came not from the southward spread of an existing agricultural pattern but from the implantation of a large enclave into the midst of a ranching region.”\textsuperscript{25} The \textit{Agricultural Bulletin}, a publication of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, trumpeted claims that “[g]rowing Bermuda onions for the spring market

has proved to be very profitable in many sections of Texas, but it has been especially profitable this year in the fertile Winter Garden District, which lies about 120 miles south of San Antonio, Texas, in a rapidly growing territory served by the Missouri Pacific Lines."

Local farmers associations and chambers of commerce also joined in the efforts to draw outsiders and their money to the new farm areas, launching national advertising campaigns. According to one of these newcomers, the "people at Asherton are principally newcomers, largely from the north, but from all parts, who came in after the railroad was put in. . . . We came in response to advertisements." Local boosters declared that Laredo and its vicinity would soon become a fabulously wealthy agricultural area. "Laredo of the future will undoubtedly be known as a famous citrus fruit-raising locality," the San Antonio Express declared in 1911. According to the paper, there was "no better place than Laredo for the man who desires to start an orchard for the growing of citrus fruits" for "land will be worth many hundreds of dollars more per acre in the future when there shall have been an influx of citrus fruit growers."

The availability of cheap, exploitable labor was an important, if not the primary, selling point for farm lands in South Texas. A pamphlet distributed by the Carrizo Springs Chamber of Commerce, entitled "Your Opportunity May be Waiting at Carrizo Springs, Texas," discussed the opportunities for farming in

26 Quoted in "What Agricultural Experts Say and Winter Garden Farmers Have Already Done," no date, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 34, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
27 Judge W.T. Smith interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 11, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
28 "Laredo is a Very Important Point as Gateway to Mexico," San Antonio Express, April 2, 1911.
South Texas while also making it clear that not everybody was welcome: "This is not a community for a man without money. That is due to the great supply of Mexican labor that we have. A man depending on common labor for the up-keep of his family cannot compete with them. . . . But to the man with $5,000 or more, Carrizo Springs offers a better opportunity than any other section in the country."  

A land company in the Winter Garden similarly declared that the "cheapest farm labor in the United States is to be had in this section." Though located outside of South Texas, the Houston Chamber of Commerce tried to take advantage of proximity to the labor pool of South Texas by sending pamphlets to New England textile companies claiming that "unorganizable Mexican labor in inexhaustible numbers can be secured in Texas for new textile mills."  

The outbreak of World War I provided additional momentum for the farm boom. The war in Europe increased the demand for agricultural goods. Land values soared, more land was put under the plow, and total output grew. Importantly for the farmers of South Texas, this wartime economic boom did not extend to Mexico, which continued to suffer under severe economic conditions due to the continued instability of the Revolution, so the waves of immigration did not slow down. All of these things led to profits thought impossible before the war.  

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29 Quoted in Taylor, "Dimmit County," 240.  
32 Carey McWilliams described the results of this farm bonanza in his own inimitable style: "Making more money than they had ever made before, enjoying an almost unlimited market and fabulous prices, the land industrialists went berserk in their demand for labor. They howled for laborers, and more laborers. Reading over the transactions of the farm organizations during this
The years after the end of World War I witnessed the collapse of the worldwide agricultural economy, as the artificially high prices of the war years plummeted, dragging credit-dependent farmers (and even entire nations) into bankruptcy. Such was not the case in South Texas, however. A number of small operations went out of business as market prices dropped, but the region’s economy as a whole continued to grow throughout the post-war years as outside capital poured into the farm regions, the amount of cultivated land increased, and output grew. The Winter Garden, especially, grew rapidly in the years after the war, becoming one of the primary off-season sources of produce at the same time that similar operations developed in California and Florida. After 1919, as the nation as a whole entered into the beginning of a long agricultural depression, the Winter Garden became one of the most important farming regions in the country.

Spinach and onions were the primary crops, but appreciable amounts of cabbage and tomatoes also came from the Winter Garden. Onions had been produced before the 1920s, but spinach did not become prominent until 1920. What began as an experiment – four acres grown near Crystal City (Zavala County) in the winter of 1917-1918, yielding 3 carlots – rapidly grew. By 1920 200 acres of spinach had been planted in Dimmit and Zavala counties combined, shipping 148 carlots. By 1929, Zavala County had more than eight thousand acres of spinach under cultivation, making it the largest spinach-producing area in the world. More than three thousand carlots shipped from Crystal City alone in

period, one is impressed with the obscenity of the large growers’ greed, the brutality of their demands. They were literally wild with a frenzy of profit-patriotism.” Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 168-169.
1929, while similar growth occurred in the nearby counties of Dimmit and Webb. These three counties combined produced more than half of the national spinach crop during the boom years of the 1920s. Similarly, the Winter Garden became one of the largest producers of Bermuda onions in the United States, shipping three-quarters of the state's carlots in 1929, when Texas led the nation in Bermuda onion production.\textsuperscript{33} Not surprisingly, the area irrigated grew just as rapidly during these years. In 1919 Zavala County had 1642 acres irrigated and Dimmit contained 5397 acres. A decade later Zavala increased to 13,126 acres, while Dimmit had 13,694 acres under irrigation.\textsuperscript{34}

This spinach boom brought even more outside investment and led to the consolidation of the spinach holdings into the hands of the large shippers who controlled the irrigation companies and the national marketing of Winter Garden spinach.\textsuperscript{35} One example of this consolidation was Fred Vahlsing, a New York grocer. Seeking a way to provide fresh produce year-round, and witnessing the enormous production coming out of the Winter Garden, Vahlsing purchased land in the area. By the end of the 1930s, long after the bottom had fallen out of the spinach market due to the Great Depression, Vahlsing controlled 10,000 acres, employed 3,000 employees, operated packing sheds and an ice plant, and shipped produce to 127 cities in the United States.\textsuperscript{36} While Vahlsing was surely more

\textsuperscript{33} Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, "Bermuda Onion Culture in Texas," November 1932, Quarters Project Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.
\textsuperscript{34} James Weeks Tiller, Jr., The Texas Winter Garden: Commercial Cool-Season Vegetable Production, Research Monograph No. 33 (Austin: Bureau of Business Research at the University of Texas at Austin, 1971), 31, 54, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{35} Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, "Spinach under Irrigation in Texas," November 1932, Quarters Project Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.
successful than the vast majority of newcomer farmers who appeared in the Winter Garden and the rest of South Texas during these years, he provides a perfect illustration of the way in which outside influence came to bear on the region and the enormous growth that occurred in the agricultural economy with the introduction of this new capital.

While the rest of South Texas did not witness such rapid growth in such a short period of time as the Winter Garden, the scale of growth was no less impressive during the 1910s and 1920s. As a whole, the total value of farms in the state of Texas rose from $1,843,208,395 in 1910 to $3,700,173,319 in 1920 (during the tail end of the war agricultural bubble) to $3,045,270,798 in 1925. Only California matched the level of statewide growth in farm values. Crop values, however, outpaced any other state in the nation, rising to $900,472,787 in 1919 before falling back to $756,105,985 in 1924. During the same years California peaked at $282,579,083. Some of the growth came from the growing cotton fields of central and east Texas, but moving down to the county level shows that much of this growth occurred in South Texas. Cameron County witnessed growth in total farm value from $7,894,738 in 1910 to $29,430,868 in 1925, multiplying four-fold in only fifteen years. Immediately adjacent to Cameron, Hidalgo County underwent equally explosive growth, increasing from $9,926,121 in 1910 to $36,930,822 in 1925.

Crop values in South Texas did not rise quite as dramatically as total farm value, but the growth still dwarfed what was happening in the rest of the nation. Cameron County crop values rose from $1,773,036 in 1919 to $4,908,117 in 1924, while Hidalgo increased from $2,424,467 in 1919 to $6,440,219 in 1924. Nueces County (Corpus Christi) grew from $4,142,022 to $8,189,511 between 1919 and 1924, while Willacy County, located just north of Cameron, saw its crop value rise from $34,771 in 1919 to $785,235 in 1924. Total carlot shipments also increased drastically as a number of new crops flourished throughout South Texas. The spinach boom in the Winter Garden was matched by a citrus boom in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and a cotton boom in the Coastal Bend area near Corpus Christi.

Clearly, then, agricultural growth in South Texas was spectacular, transforming the region in a short period of time into one of the most productive farming areas in the nation. Like similar changes in the same years in California and Florida, this growth flowed not only out of the increased capital and transportation facilities that came with the expansion of the national railroad network and the growth of national and international markets for agricultural goods, but also out of the construction of a system of industrialized agriculture that took advantage of the seemingly endless supply of cheap labor to create

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massive agribusiness complexes. The result was what Carey McWilliams called "factories in the field."\textsuperscript{42}

South Texas became one of the most important centers for the growth of agribusiness. At the heart of industrial farming was the creation of a racial/ethnic division of labor that mandated limited job opportunities. In the context of South Texas, that meant that white and Chicano (as well as the much less numerous African American) workers had prescribed positions within the workforce. Mexicans and Mexican Americans could not advance above the status of sharecropper or wage laborer. At the same time, however, there also existed a sort of glass floor that effectively barred many Anglos from these lower status sharecropper and wage labor positions, creating a flip side of the "wages of whiteness" that priced them out of any positions below tenant farmer.\textsuperscript{43} Farmers throughout South Texas refused to lease to Anglos on halves, offering them only the terms of thirds and fourths which required the capital to fund most of the crop. Employers described wage labor as "Mexican work" that was beneath whites.\textsuperscript{44} These strictures helped create a rigidly segmented job market similar to the Jim Crow South. Unlike their brethren in the South, however, South Texas growers could rely on continued migration from Mexico to replenish and expand their labor supply. This segmented, ever-expanding labor supply helped to maintain a wage scale in South Texas lower than anywhere else in the nation.

\textsuperscript{42} McWilliams, Factories in the Field.
Another aspect of this regime of agricultural management was the use of a 
reserve army of labor built on the segmented labor market. Corporate farms’ 
ability to attract an overabundance of workers allowed them to keep wages down 
by resorting to the constant threat of hiring replacements. When the harvest 
ended, workers disappeared from the immediate vicinity of the farms, erasing the 
year-long reciprocal duties that came with tenant farming and sharecropping in 
the older agricultural areas of the Southeast. While farmers depended on surplus 
labor, however, many also maintained an important, if ever-shrinking, number of 
sharecroppers who remained throughout the year. “The primary purpose of 
maintaining Mexican sharecroppers on halves is to immobilize them so that ample 
labor will be on hand through the year and a large nucleus to start the picking 
season,” wrote Paul Taylor. “Thus farmers, in the manner of many industrial 
employers, maintain individual labor reserves.”45 Often kept in place by debt 
peonage, these sharecroppers served as an unpaid labor force throughout the year. 
By the onset of the Great Depression, however, the number of sharecroppers and 
tenants dwindled to the point of irrelevance as the migrant work force grew 
throughout the South Texas agricultural regions.46

The methods by which agricultural interests recruited these armies of 
labor differed little from the recruitment procedures of northern factories.

45 Paul Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 121.
46 Montejano, Race, Labor Repression, and Capitalist Agriculture, 8. Persistence of sharecropping 
also depended on region and crop. The cotton belt around Corpus Christi had the highest rate of 
tenancy, the Winter Garden with its vegetable farms had the lowest rate, while the Lower Rio 
Grande Valley fell in between these two extremes. See David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans 
Testimony before the Commission on Industrial Relations highlighted the typical method:

There are so-called employment agencies in Laredo and other border cities who get "orders" from farmers throughout Texas. . . and it is these agents of the said employment concerns that get these Mexicans just as they cross the Rio Grande and ship them off to their destination, many times misrepresenting things to them and causing great hardships to these Mexicans and their families. The employment agencies at the border generally work under an agreed combine with others of the same class in San Antonio, and the concerns at San Antonio see to it that the "consignment" goes through to destination without leaving the cars if possible. When they have to be transferred from the I.G. and N. to other railroad stations they are marched straight across the city of San Antonio up Commerce or Houston Street, and it is no uncommon sight to see as many as a hundred or more marching together. These employment agencies are generally paid by the farmer $1 a head when delivered at their destination. . . . When put to work at destination or upon their first pay day they are informed so much had been charged to each and every one of them for transportation and employment fees, which said amounts are deducted from their earnings.47

Even as agriculturalists banded together into growers associations, they continued to rely on labor contractors to draw workers from across South Texas and across the border in Mexico. There were others, however, who relied on less formal means to draw labor. Onion growers in the Winter Garden, for instance, attracted some of their harvest workers by distributing advertisements among migrant cotton workers as they moved from the Lower Rio Grande Valley to West Texas, which was not as reliable as contractors but cut out the need to pay recruitment fees to a middleman.48

Growers recruited workers from two primary areas. First, they looked to the cities and towns of South Texas, which, as Paul Taylor argued, acted as "fluid

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47 Emilio Flores, quoted in Coalson, Development of the Migratory Farm Labor System in Texas, 16.
48 Paul Taylor, "Dimmit County," 325.
reservoirs of agricultural labors" from which residents could quickly move to and from farming regions on short notice, "stimulated by the character of the labor demand, which not only fluctuates seasonally but shifts every few days from field to field."\textsuperscript{49} Even in the larger towns and cities such as San Antonio, Laredo, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville, an important segment of the population survived on irregular, seasonal agricultural labor. Importantly, there was no recruitment from other states into Texas, which enjoyed a labor surplus that made outside recruitment from anywhere but Mexico unnecessary.

The second important area of recruitment, then, was Mexico. While border enforcement and the laws governing who could cross the border for what purposes changed during the decades from 1910 to the Great Depression, the methods of procuring labor from Mexico remained remarkably unchanged. Contractors sent representatives to the border towns and transported workers north. According to Paul Taylor, "Some farmers of Nueces County and other parts of Texas have been accustomed to send dependable Mexicans to Mexico to recruit others, even if necessary giving them money to pay immigration fees. . . . In Nueces County, for example, one farmer was describing the practice to me, when another, aware of its illegality, interrupted him."\textsuperscript{50}

For many farmers, however, this system left too much power in the hands of the labors contractors. In 1923, growers and farmers' associations forced the state to create the Texas Labor Bureau as a free employment agency in order to, in the words of the Bureau itself, "protect the poor people against these

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{50} Paul Taylor, \textit{American-Mexican Frontier}, 101.
unscrupulous” contractors. The Labor Commissioner declared two years after the establishment of the Bureau, “Before the establishment of this service many pickers picked in South Texas and there remained, many in Central Texas moved no further, but now many start in the South and wind up in West Texas.” While the Labor Bureau did little more than direct workers during the cotton harvests throughout the state, it pointed toward a more active role for the state in the structuring of the agricultural labor market that would become increasingly important in the coming decades.

These methods of labor contracting, both public and private, helped create an intrastate migrant labor stream that served two primary purposes. First, it acted as a necessary method of achieving subsistence for farm laborers who could not survive on the wages from a single harvest. Second, it maintained low wages by keeping workers constantly in motion and unable to bargain for higher pay before a new harvest began and they had to move. The largest and best organized migrant stream moved north and west following the cotton harvests from the Lower Rio Grande Valley through the Corpus Christi area, then up into Central and East Texas, with some moving as far as West Texas in the late fall. At its beginning, approximately twenty-five thousand migrant workers picked cotton in the Valley in the early summer, to be joined by another twenty-five thousand in Nueces and San Patricio counties, helping Nueces produce more cotton than any

52 Labor Commissioner E.J. Crocker to Governor Miriam Amanda Ferguson, December 5, 1925, File 301-426-25, Miriam Amanda Ferguson Gubernatorial Papers, TSA.
other county in the nation by 1930.\textsuperscript{53} In the fields of Central Texas the army of migrant pickers grew to approximately two hundred thousand, with some then traveling as far as Amarillo in the Panhandle before returning south at the end of the season.\textsuperscript{54}

Cotton picking only lasted through the summer and fall, and since the wages earned during cotton season were often not enough for the year, almost all of these migrants also had to work in the fields for the rest of the year. For those from the Lower Rio Grande Valley, that often meant working in citrus or produce. For those from San Antonio, it could mean seasonal labor in the pecan shelling industry or one of the other semi-industrial enterprises that shut down during harvest season. A typical year for a farm worker from the Winter Garden involved the following, as described by a rancher and farm owner from Carrizo Springs: “They plant onions here beginning in November. Then they work in spinach, onions, cauliflower. That runs to about May. Then after a month or two, they start to pick cotton around Brownsville and work north with the cotton until about November when they return home.”\textsuperscript{55} One unintended but predictable consequence of this migrant stream was the creation of a much larger interstate migrant stream that began in South Texas but extended well beyond the borders.

\textsuperscript{53} Foley, "Mexicans, Mechanization, and the Growth of Corporate Cotton Culture in South Texas," 279.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 278-279; McWilliams, North from Mexico, 158-160; Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, xi; Paul Schuster Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” in On the Ground in the Thirties (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1983), 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Mr. Baylor, interviewed by Paul Taylor, November 30, 1928, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 13, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
of the state, which would become one of the major concerns of farmers’
associations and politicians during the 1920s and after.\textsuperscript{56}

The increased availability of farm machinery in the 1910s and 1920s also
affected the growth of agribusiness and labor relations. Louis Bailey, a cotton
tenant farmer in Agua Dulce, near Corpus Christi, claimed that the “Bolshevik
ideas of the Mexicans that the white can pay them anything are going to ruin
them. We are going to substitute machinery for them. The country is full of labor
now.” He then later added that the “cotton pickers are bringing the machine on
themselves.”\textsuperscript{57} Likewise, a large landowner in Nueces County told Taylor, “But I
keep a plow going to keep Mexicans in a frame of mind to do it at a reasonable
price,” before making clear the reason for wielding the threat of mechanization:
“Not that we want to beat the Mexicans out – but if we have machines, the pickers
would be satisfied with $1 instead of $1.25 a hundred pounds.”\textsuperscript{58} Some even cast
their decision not to employ machinery as a sort of charity: if mechanical pickers
operated in the cotton fields of Nueces County or if mechanical onion
transplanters operated in the Winter Garden or Willacy County, farmers would no
longer be able to “make work” for Mexicans.\textsuperscript{59} To be sure, all mechanization was
not used to undercut the bargaining power of labor, but it was an essential part of
the calculations made in determining whether or not to introduce machinery.

The Taft Ranch near Corpus Christi became the archetype of the modern
southwestern agricultural enterprise. Organized along the same lines as any

\textsuperscript{56} See section below on Tejano Diaspora.
\textsuperscript{57} Louis Bailey, interviewed by Paul Taylor, August 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 23, Paul S.
Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
\textsuperscript{58} Paul Taylor, \textit{American-Mexican Frontier}, 113.
\textsuperscript{59} Paul Taylor, \textit{American-Mexican Frontier}, 110.
corporation, Taft land was divided into six 1,000 acre farms. Each "operated as a self-contained unit that consisted of a white superintendent, Anglo or Mexican foremen, and Mexican laborers." According to historian Neil Foley, on the Taft Ranch and the farms that followed its lead, "King Cotton was subject to a board of directors and his retainers were now mostly Mexican wage laborers." Similar to the mining companies of the Mountain West and the railroad company towns of the Midwest and Northeast, the Taft Ranch established a sort of closed society where all monetary circulation went through the corporation. Company stores, company housing, company gins, and other facilities tied workers (both migrant and non-migrant) to the Taft Ranch by refusing to allow them to do their business elsewhere. Here we see not only the intersection of seemingly backward forms of peonage with the modern corporate system in the creation of this closed system, but more importantly, a vertically and horizontally integrating corporation that looked very similar to the steel companies of the late nineteenth century or the automobile manufacturers of the twentieth century. Thus, a thoroughly modern agribusiness regime was born in South Texas that relied on a racial division of labor, the creation of a reserve army of labor, and the use of mechanization as a contingent aspect of the production process. The Taft Ranch, as result, expanded its operations beyond the cultivation of cotton and into ginning, cottonseed-oil production, and marketing that foreshadowed the massive growth of agribusiness throughout the Southwest during the first half of the

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60 Foley, "Mexicans, Mechanization, and the Growth of Corporate Cotton Culture in South Texas," 289.
61 Ibid., 290.
62 Ibid., 287.
twentieth century as the trans-Mississippi West outpaced the more traditional agricultural areas of the Southeast.

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It was not long before agricultural and industrial interests in other parts of the nation took notice of the spectacular growth in South Texas, especially its seemingly endless supplies of Mexican and Mexican American workers. By 1912 Arizona cotton growers began advertising for labor in South Texas newspapers. When cotton prices sky-rocketed during World War I, these same cotton growers sent labor agents to El Paso and San Antonio to recruit larger numbers of pickers, reserving special trains to transport workers free of charge to Arizona. 63

Likewise, railroad companies had long looked to South Texas and the US-Mexico border region for much of their work force. 64 By the time of World War I, however, northern and Midwestern business interests looked jealously at the labor supply built up in South Texas. Throughout the last years of the 1910s and the 1920s, these agricultural and industrial interests successfully drew many Mexican and Mexican American migrants out of South Texas, while also copying the

63 Coalson, Development of the Migratory Farm Labor System in Texas, 34.
64 In addition, as discussed in the previous chapters, migrant labor had long moved from Northern Mexico, through South Texas, to the cotton fields of East Texas and beyond. According to Arthur Corwin, "by the opening of the present [Twentieth] century one found dozens of migrant labor colonies alongside such towns as Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville, and soon after, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Asherton, Carrizo Springs, Uvalde, Ozona, Encinal, Cotulla, Miranda City, Hebronville, Falfurrias, Raymondville, Pearsall, Dilley, Castroville, Mercedes, San Benito, Harlingen, Mathis, Robstown, Beeville, Falls City, and elsewhere. By 1910 this design was rapidly spreading to other border states, such as California, as employers searched for a mobile and cheap supply of 'stoop labor.'" Corwin, "Early Mexican Labor Migration," in Corwin, ed., Immigrants – and Immigrants, 29-30.
often-illegal recruitment practices of Lone Star farmers by recruiting workers in Northern Mexico, bypassing South Texas altogether.  

The process of recruiting followed by these interests was, not surprisingly, similar to that practiced by the growers of South Texas. Private labor contractors and labor agencies dominated the procurement process, serving as middlemen between the workers of South Texas and Northern Mexico and prospective employers far distant from the border. Some recruitment occurred in informal settings such as Milam Park (also known as La Plaza del Zacate), which served as a central gathering spot on the western edge of downtown San Antonio. Labor agents walked through the crowds offering jobs, cash advances, and a number of other enticements for agricultural, industrial, and railroad interests around the nation who viewed San Antonio as "a virtual Ellis Island for the tens of thousands of newcomers from Mexico in search of work and new opportunities," according to historian Zaragoza Vargas.  

Similarly, a border corrido from these years proclaimed that the city "has much work for the nation; employing everyone that has no fixed home."  

Frank Cortez operated the largest employment agency in the area. His office was in a funeral parlor he owned on El Paso Street on San Antonio's West Side. Between March and May of each year he would recruit thousands of workers to go north to the sugar beet fields operated by the Michigan Beet

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65 Obviously, Texas growers, never known for their restraint or goodwill toward competitors, did everything they could to keep these workers from leaving Texas. That topic will be discussed at length later in this chapter.
67 "Los Mojados," Box 33A, Folder 9, Norman L. McNeil Music Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.
Growers’ Employment Committee, for which he received a one-dollar per head recruitment fee. While some of these workers came from San Antonio, as many as two-thirds paid their way from places like Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Crystal City, and south of the border, hoping to be sent north toward greater opportunity and away from the agricultural boom of South Texas that refused to trickle down to the workers. San Antonio became, in the words of Carey McWilliams, “the hunting ground of labor contractors; the capitol of Mexico that lies within the United States.”

When recruiting season began, workers began to line up around Cortez’s funeral home as early as four o’clock in the morning. The line of hopeful migrants quickly wrapped around the block. Once each applicant entered the office several hours after arriving at the recruitment center, they were interviewed and given physical examinations. Those rejected for medical causes (usually for either tuberculosis or venereal disease) would seek employment through another labor agency or become a “free-wheeler” who traveled north independently. Those accepted for transport by Cortez had to wait around the El Paso Street area until they left for Michigan, which could be as long as a few months after they first walked into Cortez’s funeral parlor.

Once the day came to proceed out of San Antonio, the workers were loaded onto flat-bed pick-up trucks. Often forty or more packed the backs of these trucks as they roared north, forced to stand for the entire trip because there was no room to sit or lie down. Employment agencies and the employers who

68 McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 259-260.
69 Ibid., 260-262.
contracted the labor paid the truck drivers to make the trips as quickly and
c inconspicuously as possible. Thus, not only did they often refuse to stop for any
reason, but they also drove at unsafe speeds (especially given their cargo loads)
and took more hazardous, secondary routes to avoid undue attention from law
enforcement. According to Carey McWilliams, the drivers, “as a rule,” were “a
domineering and dictatorial lot; as arrogant as ship captains on a slave galley.”70
Their passengers surely agreed. Teléforo Mandujano, who traveled on one of
these trucks from San Antonio to Ohio, recalled that the truck stopped only once
or twice en route, forcing the passengers to use coffee cans as urinals. One man
even tied himself to a stake on the bed of the truck so he would not fall out of the
truck if he fell asleep.71 Salomé Ravago, who endured a trip from San Antonio to
Michigan, remembered a trip that required five days and four nights with only
partially functional brakes. “The workers finally forced the driver, at the point of
a gun, to stop and buy brake fluid with money which they lent him,” recalled
Ravago.72 Workers took these risks, Carey McWilliams argued, because
“employment in sugar beets in Michigan” was “preferable to field work in
Texas.”73

During the 1920s, growers from a number of different parts of the United
States experimented with labor recruited from South Texas. In 1925, cotton
growers in the Mississippi Delta imported hundreds of Mexicans and Mexican
Americans in an attempt to replicate the Taft Ranch model of cotton culture.

70 Ibid., 267.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 267-268.
73 Ibid., 271.
Within a few weeks more than one-fifth had contracted malaria, abruptly ending the experiment (though it is worth mentioning these same growers tried again in the 1930s with more success).\textsuperscript{74} Despite a number of similar instances of experimentation, however, the Upper Midwest was, far and away, the primary destination for workers recruited in South Texas. More specifically, the massive sugar beet combines in Michigan and nearby states remained the most prominent importers of labor.

Before looking at the specifics of what these migrant laborers did once they reached the beet fields, it is worth examining the structure of the sugar beet industry. Carey McWilliams argued that "the sugar-beet industry has been created out of public funds and today is being subsidized to the extent of $350,000,000 a year by the American public. It is this subsidy which, in part, makes possible the perpetuation of rural sweatshops and what has been aptly characterized as industrialized slavery."\textsuperscript{75} Born out of tariff protections against Caribbean sugar beginning in the late nineteenth century, sugar beet corporations emerged as massive, vertically-integrated agricultural enterprises little different from the other industrial corporations of the time. In the Midwest the Michigan Sugar Company and the American Beet Sugar Company dominated the production and processing of beets, while the Great Western Sugar Company held a virtual monopoly over the industry in Colorado.\textsuperscript{76} These corporations owned

\textsuperscript{74} Coalson, Development of the Migratory Farm Labor System in Texas, 34; Mark Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 78.
\textsuperscript{75} McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 109.
\textsuperscript{76} Paul Schuster Taylor, "Mexican Labor in the United States: Valley of the South Platte, Colorado," University of California Publications in Economics 6:2 (1929), 115; Dennis Nodin
the processing factories, but owned little if any land. Instead, they used their financial muscle to control every aspect of production through a complex, multi-layered system of contracting that left every aspect of the process under the direct control of the corporation. They sold seed to the landowners, who had little choice but to grow sugar beets, and contracted to purchase the entire crop at predetermined prices. In Colorado, the Great Western Sugar Company even loaned money to banks that was then used to finance growers, while in the Midwest the corporations tended to finance growers directly. The companies also handled all recruitment for non-local labor, which was the vast majority of the sugar beet workforce throughout the boom years of the 1920s. Thus, in the words of Paul Taylor, the “influence of the manufacturing side of the sugar-beet industry permeates all aspects of beet culture.”

It was the corporations, not the growers, then, who contracted through Frank Cortez and others like him. And like a mirror image of the campaigns advertising opportunities for wealth in South Texas that appeared throughout the Midwest in the 1910s and 1920s, the sugar beet companies placed advertisements in a number of Spanish-language publications advertising the opportunities available in the sugar beet fields. The Columbia Sugar Company of Michigan ran ads in San Antonio’s *La Prensa*, arguably the most important Spanish-language newspaper in the United States during those years, promising ample land and, most importantly, a respectful atmosphere free of the anti-Mexican prejudice of Texas. As Kathleen Mapes has argued, “the recruiters depicted work in

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77 Taylor, “Valley of the South Platte,” 115.
Michigan’s sugar beet fields not simply as a way to make money but as a different kind of life than most Mexicans could expect in a Jim Crow Texas.”

Prior to the 1920s, sugar beet growers had relied on European immigrants as their primary labor force. In both Colorado and the Midwest, German-Russians made up the majority of the workforce during the first fifteen years of the century. During World War I, however, immigration from Europe halted at the same time that the market for beet sugar expanded. As a result, the sugar corporations increased production while searching for a new source of laborers. By 1918, Mexicans and Mexican Americans had become the primary labor force in the beet fields, and by 1927 they made up at least three-quarters of the migrant work force. At the same time, the beet fields became one of the most important economic opportunities for Mexicans and Mexican Americans trapped within the self-reinforcing cycle of migrant farm work in Texas. A study of migratory farm workers from Crystal City in the 1930s showed that sixty percent of surveyed families worked seasonally in the sugar beet fields before returning south at the end of the season. Even though beet labor only lasted a few months each year, it was the most important source of income for farm workers in the Winter Garden, even more important than the local spinach harvests. “Many Mexicans leave for

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the beets,” one border corrido declared, “providing them with nice cars and beautiful women.”

Beet wages could be considered high only by the low standards of field work in Texas. In 1923, the Beet Growers Association, that worked with the Great Western Sugar Company in Colorado, admitted as much in a letter to its members. It reported that Colorado beet growers required 7,700 field workers from Texas for the upcoming harvest. The association warned that beet growers in Michigan would recruit more than six thousand from Texas. More threatening, however, was the interest of steel companies in Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas: “They pay 40c to 50c per hour, offer steady work for a year, free transportation, if labor works 90 days, opportunity for promotion, etc. This is an especially hard line of competition for agents recruiting field laborers. . . Employers from all states are looking to Texas to supply additional common labor that they need.”

Clearly, the sugar beet growers and corporations understood the condition of farm laborers in Texas and they knew their own position within the national economy and wage structure. Their profits depended on the continued existence of workers in South Texas willing to work for low wages, and the specter of competition from industrial employers lurked as a threat to this labor supply.

When the migrant workers finally arrived in the beet zones they often found that they had to deal with a different set of problems than those they had encountered in the fields and towns of Texas. First, the sugar corporations

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81 “Los Mojados,” Box 33A, Folder 9, Norman L. McNeil Music Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.
82 Quoted in Taylor, “Valley of the South Platte,” 140-141.
instructed labor contractors to transport recruits north before the work began so that there was a guaranteed force available at the start of the season. Workers who arrived in April or May had to wait without pay until late May or early June before the first operations began.\footnote{This aspect of recruitment changed during the 1930s, as the corporations and the landowners sought to hide, as much as was possible, their reliance on Mexican and Mexican American workers during the Depression. Instead, they tried to keep labor away until the very start of the harvest to avoid undue attention.} The first of the season’s three pay days did not come until July, so the workers had to rely on advances or credit from local stores while they waited.\footnote{Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 79.} Later in the 1920s, payments declined to two times per season, pushing workers even further into debt. In addition, many of the sugar companies withheld a few dollars from each pay period until the end of the season in order to ensure that workers did not leave before the harvest ended in search of higher wages. They did not offer the hold-back money to workers until the harvest had already ended and many of the workers had to leave for employment elsewhere.\footnote{Valdes, \textit{Al Norte}, 13.} Many contracts contained clauses that voided any responsibilities of the company or landowner if the crop failed, leaving the contracted workers stranded in remote beet fields more than a thousand miles from the point of recruitment.\footnote{Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 80.} George Edson, a Labor Department investigator, reported that, because of these policies, “at the end of the beet growing season, they find that through charges of transportation, commission, supplies and accommodation and certain other deductions, they have no pay left.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Wages were, in fact, even lower than they appeared to be because employers and contractors paid male heads of household for labor done by entire

\footnote{Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 79.}
\footnote{Valdes, \textit{Al Norte}, 13.}
\footnote{Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 80.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
families. Corporations knowingly determined acreage allotments according to number of workers in each unit, including children, but sought to avoid leaving any proof of child labor in the actual contracts. In the fields, however, the corporations and the landowners welcomed child labor. A study in Michigan in 1920 determined that among beet worker families, twenty percent of six year olds, sixty percent of eight year olds, and roughly one hundred percent of ten year olds worked in the fields with the rest of their family. A study taken in the Wisconsin beet fields four years later found that 52% of field workers were under the age of fifteen, while only 21% were older then twenty-one. Thus, unacknowledged child labor, purposefully hidden by the nature of the contracts, actually performed the majority of beet labor. 88

Once they entered the fields, migrant workers faced an arduous series of tasks that lasted from late May until the end of the harvest in November. First came blocking and thinning during May and June. Workers removed unneeded plants from each row with a hoe. Long-handled hoes had been used before the introduction of Mexican and Mexican American workers. During the 1920s, however, bolstered by declarations from agricultural experts at nearby land grant colleges, the corporations instituted the short-handled hoe. While more accurate and less likely to damage the crops than the long-handled variety, it required workers to stoop in order to reach the plants. As Dennis Valdes noted, “the simultaneous introduction of the short-handled hoe and Mexicano workers linked the two in the popular and academic mind.” 89 The short-handled hoe remained

88 Valdes, Al Norte, 13.
89 Ibid., 15-16.
the standard implement until blocking by machine became possible in the late 1920s. In the meantime, however, these stumpy implements caused ruptured discs, torn back ligaments, and arthritis of the spine.  

The pre-harvest operations finished by early August, so workers faced another period without work before the harvest began in late September or October, again falling back on advances and credit to subsist. Some were able to find temporary work elsewhere, ranging from agricultural employment to railroad work as they waited for the harvest to begin. By the time the arduous task of topping came around, the season changed and much of the work had to be done in the rain and cold. Walking through the fields with large knives used to slice the top off of the beets, accidents were frequent, with missing fingers and accidental gashes on arms and legs commonplace among beet workers.  

At the end of the six-month season, male adults earned, on average, $160 in the Midwestern beet fields in the late 1920s. While that represented a substantial improvement over the wages available in the fields of Texas, these wages had declined from those earned by the European workers a decade earlier. While the agricultural bubble of the war years certainly played some part in higher wages during those years, that does not explain the disparity between earnings in the late 1920s and the $280 average for European adult males in 1920. Clearly, then, the spectacular growth of the sugar beet industry, just like agriculture in South Texas, depended on a depressed wage scale that was made possible by the miniscule pay available in the region south of San Antonio, as

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90 Ibid., 16.
91 Ibid., 17.
well as the practices of family recruitment and child labor. Still, argued Carey McWilliams, beet migrants returned back to Texas “as they left, with scarcely any money.”

Not all of these recruited workers returned to Texas at the end of the beet season, however. Labor Department Investigator George Edson found that ninety percent of Mexicans who had been in the United States for less than a year returned to Mexico or Texas at the end of the beet harvest, beginning the annual agricultural cycle all over again with the winter harvests in South Texas. After two or three years in the United States, however, only thirty-five did so. Fifteen percent remained in the countryside near the beet fields, while fully fifty percent moved to nearby urban areas. While his numbers seem rather high considering the thousands of migrant farm workers who returned to South Texas every winter, they point toward the growth of a permanent Mexican and Mexican American population, especially in the Midwest, as some migrant workers shifted away from the border states.

The ultimate goal for those who remained in the Upper Midwest, especially those who moved to urban centers like Chicago and Detroit, was to secure some form of industrial labor. Eventually, “[f]arm work was viewed as a last resort, casual labor performed only by greenhorns or by Mexicans who constituted the permanent labor migration force from Texas.” Beet work served as a lower rung on a hoped-for employment ladder that would lead to better-paying and more stable industrial employment in the steel mills of Chicago or the

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92 McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 280.
93 Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 84.
94 Vargas, Proletarians of the North, 33.
automotive plants of Detroit. And as had been the case with the sugar beet corporations, northern industrial interests welcomed the Mexican and Mexican American workers as a valued supplement to the reserve army of labor collecting in the cities of the Upper Midwest.

Some industrial corporations recruited workers directly from South Texas, following the same general operating procedures as the sugar beet growers. Labor agents from steel mills competed with all of the other contractors circulating among the prospective migrants gathered in Milam Park in San Antonio, while Buick recruited some workers directly from Texas for its Flint assembly plant.\textsuperscript{95} Bethlehem Steel also recruited a number of workers directly from Texas, but under an unusual arrangement. The postwar depression slowed operations across the nation, but when the steel industry resumed its pre-depression levels in 1923, Bethlehem Steel looked to South Texas as a logical source for labor. Between April 6 and May 30, 1923, 912 men, 29 women, and 7 children, all Mexican nationals, traveled to Pennsylvania under contract. The Mexican Consul-General in San Antonio signed the contract, providing the migrants with the implicit protection of the Mexican government. Both the company and the imported workers seemed to sour on the arrangement in the next few years, however. By 1929, only six years after the first thousand recruits arrived from Mexico, less than four hundred Mexicans remained in Bethlehem, and they eventually left during the Great Depression. Like the efforts to recruit Mexican and Mexican American field workers to the Mississippi Delta, this attempt to bring workers out of the US-Mexico border region and into

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 19, 103.
northeastern steel mills failed, though it did little to diminish the hopes of some that this malleable labor pool could be successfully exploited by northern industry.\textsuperscript{96}

More often, however, Mexicans and Mexican Americans sought employment in northern industry of their own accord, traveling away from the border region in search of more opportunity and less discrimination, following the same hopeful path as African Americans leaving the South during the same years.\textsuperscript{97} Whether they entered the cities after working in the beet fields or they traveled there solely for urban employment, all saw the industrial cities as a substantive improvement over the lives they could lead in Mexico or South Texas.

One migrant to Chicago described Mexicans' broadening geographical range:

In the early days before Díaz was deposed and there was work enough in Mexico for all, one heard only of the states of Texas and California. The few Mexicans who left Mexico went there and wrote back from there. After a while we heard of New Mexico and Arizona, but beyond that there was no more United States to us. I remember distinctly with what great surprise we received a letter in our pueblo from a Mexican who had gone to Pennsylvania. "Oh, where can that be! That must be very, very far away. It must be farther than New York, close to England." It was not until years after the war that we heard of St. Louis, then of Chicago and Illinois. Things were very good, I heard, so I came here direct from Laredo.\textsuperscript{98}

Many migrants to Chicago and Detroit followed the same path, bypassing employment in the border states and instead traveling directly to the industrial North. The result, according to labor economist Paul Taylor, was that "Mexicans have entered the heart of industrial America. They are now the latest and lowliest

\textsuperscript{97} See Vargas, \textit{Proletarians of the North}.
\textsuperscript{98} Paul Schuster Taylor, "Mexican Labor in the United States: Chicago and the Calumet Region," \textit{University of California Publications in Economics} 7, no. 2 (1932), 73.
newcomers in the long succession of migrating nationalities that have furnished
the labor to build and maintain the basic industries of the United States.”\textsuperscript{99} When
George Edson studied the presence of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the
North in 1927, he found that 30,827 held industrial employment in the industrial
belt stretching from St. Paul, Minnesota, to the steel mills of Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{100}

Despite improved wages, however, insecurity was still one of the primary
realities in the lives of Mexican and Mexican American industrial workers. Many
Mexicans and Mexican Americans found themselves bumping up against the
same glass ceiling that confronted African Americans entering industrial
employment. Relegated to the most dangerous jobs, laid off at the first sign of
market instability, and often made victims of the seasonal nature of most
industrial production, many of these newly arrived migrants found themselves
pushed back into a life of transiency. As they shifted between cities like Chicago,
Gary, and Detroit, they found themselves secluded in crowded, dirty
neighborhoods between industrial districts.\textsuperscript{101} When industrial labor could not be
found, some had to return to the fields for the relative security of sugar beet
harvesting. As Kathleen Mapes argues, “for many the path from rural fields to
urban centers proved to be more circular than linear.”\textsuperscript{102} Thus, industrial
migration often created a parallel migration stream more compact geographically

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{100} Vargas, \textit{Proletarians of the North}, 86.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 61-62, 117.
\textsuperscript{102} Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 86.
and slightly more stable than the interstate agricultural migrant stream, but one still rife with issues of instability and insecurity.\textsuperscript{103}

The Montano family followed this unstable path between agricultural and industrial labor. All fifteen members of the family entered the United States at Laredo in 1920, and exhausted much of their money in paying the head tax. They first went to San Antonio, where four men in the family secured jobs at a dairy farm outside the city. After seeing a billboard advertising sugar beet employment in Michigan, the family went to a farm near Saginaw, where every member of the family participated in planting and harvesting. During the late stages of hoeing, four family members went to Saginaw and secured employment in the General Motors Central Foundry. As the steel industry slid into recession in 1921, however, three of the four lost their jobs. The family remained in the beet fields until 1924, when Ventura, his wife Maria, and their daughter went to Detroit, where Ventura worked in the massive Ford River Rouge plant. His job lasted until 1928, when a lay-off forced the Montanos to return to the beet fields, no more financially stable than they had been when they first trekked north.\textsuperscript{104}

Labor economist Paul Taylor uncovered a number of similar stories among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Chicago. One man recalled leaving Mexico in 1918 and traveling first to San Antonio, where he became a cement worker. As cotton harvest time approached, work slowed down in San Antonio,\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{103} Mexicans engaged in urban labor also had to deal with the deportation drive of 1921, that especially targeted Chicago, sending many who lacked proof of permanent residence back to Mexico. While this deportation campaign paled in comparison to what would come in the Great Depression, Vargas is correct in arguing that the 1921 deportations served as a preview of things to come for the Mexican communities of the urban Upper Midwest. Vargas, Proletarians of the North, 83-86.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 98-99; Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 87.
so he entered the cotton migrant stream, hoping to earn more money there than in the city. He left Texas in 1920, arriving in Chicago during the winter. A month and a half after arriving he secured employment in a steel mill. But, he complained, “it was not steady and they took advantage of the hard times to bring down the wages of the men. I worked about half the time and was laid off the other half.”

Another man had worked in Texas cotton, the beet fields of Colorado and Minnesota, and steel mills in Erie, Pennsylvania and St. Louis, before arriving in the stockyard district of Chicago. Another left the Texas cotton fields for railroad labor in Nebraska, Kansas, and Montana. He then took work as a shepherd in Montana, before traveling to Chicago and Gary for industrial employment.

Taylor also recalled the path followed by another family from Mexico. They entered the United States at Laredo in 1920 and proceeded north to the San Antonio area, first finding work clearing land and grubbing brush near the city. Next they proceeded north to Belton (between Austin and Waco) to work in a cotton-seed-oil factory where an uncle had previously worked. With insufficient work available there, the entire family then continued north to Fort Worth, where they contracted to work in sugar beets near Billings, Montana. The next year they worked in the beet fields near Casper, Wyoming, stayed in Denver for the winter, and then worked the beet fields in Colorado. By 1927, the family had a total of $15 and an old car, which they took to Raton, New Mexico, where they stayed for a year while working the coal mines. They then left for the Texas cotton harvest.

105 Taylor, “Chicago and the Calumet Region,” 74-75.
106 Ibid., 75-76.
in the fall of 1928, and then went south to the Winter Garden to transplant onions, where they remained after the outbreak of the Great Depression. "The wanderings of individual Mexicans over a period of years may thus appear more or less erratic," wrote Taylor, "but they usually follow one or another of the seasonal swirls."107

While these agricultural and industrial migrations lacked true stability, they did greatly alter the demographic reality of the Mexican and Mexican American populations in the United States. While the vast majority of the population still resided in the border states, there were now large, vibrant communities spread far beyond the traditional Mexican American homeland. The Mexican population in Michigan was ten times larger in 1920 than it had been in 1910. During the same years, the Mexican population was ten times larger in Wyoming; nine times larger in both Nebraska and Idaho; five times greater in New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois; and four times greater in Iowa.108 In addition to this increasing migration into the Midwest, there was also an important movement of migrants moving from Texas toward California and the rest of the Southwest.109

Looked at together, these permanent and seasonal migrations created a Tejano Diaspora that spread Tejano and Mexican culture throughout the nation. At the same time they created linkages between these disparate communities that helped nurture and stabilize an increasingly unstable population. These varied

109 Sanchez, Becoming Mexican American, 66.
points along the Tejano Diaspora were not, in the words of anthropologist Roger Rouse, "spatially demarcated communities," nor were those who traveled between these places "capable of maintaining an involvement in only one of them." Instead, they represented the construction of a complex, if haphazard, culture and community that stretched from the northern Mexico to the Upper Midwest and provided a measure of stability within the insecure migrant stream that helped shape much of Mexican and Mexican American life in the United States during the two decades before the Great Depression.

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Describing the agricultural growth that began in the 1910s and 1920s, Carey McWilliams wrote, "Texas is currently in the midst of a revolution in its agricultural economy of such magnitude as to be, in the words of one qualified observer, 'beyond the imagination and comprehension of the average man.'" In South Texas, this meant that a region previously deemed too arid and isolated for large-scale agriculture became one of the wealthiest farming areas in the nation. While this growth occurred at the same time that the expanded railroad network, refrigerated rail cars, and other technological and infrastructural improvements helped create a national market for agricultural goods, these

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111 Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," 247-263. Another example of a study that examines the complex and often circular paths taken by Mexican and Mexican American communities within the United States is Deutsch, No Separate Refuge. She argued that "a group with as large a migratory element as Chicanos calls out for a study that will go beyond the bounds of a single geographically defined community, a study that will link, as the migrants themselves did, the disparate sites of Chicano experience: the home village, the city, the fields, and the mining camps." (page 9)

112 McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 208.
developments in South Texas could not have occurred without the availability of large numbers of Mexican and Mexican American workers to prepare the land and harvest the crops.

As this economic growth continued, however, the growers of South Texas could not ignore the expansion of the migrant stream that they had unintentionally helped to create. Even as their own production and profits grew, the growers of South Texas feared that the increased northward migration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans threatened to bring the agricultural boom to a halt. Accordingly, farming interests worked throughout the 1910s and 1920s to limit the potential mobility of migrant farm workers in an effort to secure their ongoing agricultural revolution.
Chapter 4: Securing the Revolution: Political Restructuring and the Attempted Immobilization of Labor in South Texas

“Greed and avarice have caused employers to overlook the niceties of human rights and social justice. They need seasonal labor to harvest valuable crops, the cheaper the better. Complacent immigration officials, a misguided public opinion, a paternalistic feudal attitude towards labor have all contributed to their exploitation.”

Carlos Castañeda

Elias Garza, a native of Cuernavaca, Morelos, entered the United States at Laredo in 1912 with his Texas-born wife and children. This was his third trip north of the border. In the decade before his entry at Laredo, Garza had worked on the railroads in Kansas, and, in California, handled dynamite in a stone quarry, skinned hogs in a packing plant, and performed maintenance work at a railroad station. He returned to Mexico after his second trip to the United States, but “things were bad there, for that was in 1912, and the disorders of the revolution had already started.” Thus, Garza crossed the border a third time with his family. In San Antonio, they contracted to pick cotton in the Rio Grande Valley along with several other Mexican immigrants. When they arrived at the farm, the planter pointed Elias and his family toward an old shack that had previously housed chickens. Garza demanded better accommodations, but the farmer refused and told them to leave. As they began to depart, the sheriff arrested Garza and his wife and took them to the county jail. There the farmer claimed that Garza had skipped out on him without reimbursing his transportation costs from San Antonio. “He charged me twice the cost of the transportation,” recalled Garza, “and though I tried first not to pay him, and then to pay him what it cost, I

1 Carlos Castañeda, “What Price Migratory Labor?” Box 436, Folder 20, Judge Jose Tomas Canales Estate Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

couldn't do anything. The authorities would only pay attention to him, and as they were in league with him they told me that if I didn't pay him they would take my wife and my little children to work. Then I paid them. 3 After this legally-sanctioned shakedown, Garza and his family continued to Dallas, El Paso, Arizona, and eventually Los Angeles, tracing a path similar to hundreds of thousands of other Mexicans who entered the United States during these years and unwittingly became vital elements in the growth of the Southwestern economy and the formation of a distinct South Texas model of labor relations.

This chapter examines the ways in which growers and politicians in South Texas attempted to guarantee the continuation of their farm boom. Through the construction of overlapping systems of political, spatial, and economic domination, the political and economic elites of South Texas constructed an adequate, if imperfect, system that assured the persistence of a low-paid surplus labor force and a growing agricultural economy. The political takeover of the farming interests, the strengthening of social segregation, and construction of a more systematic web of labor controls combined with the growth of irrigation capacity and railroad facilities to spur on the farm boom throughout the 1910s and 1920s.

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As agricultural profits grew and land consolidation continued apace in South Texas, local political change came in its wake. 4 The paternalistic political

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3 Elias Garza, as quoted in Gamio, *Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*, 151.
machines that had faded during the late nineteenth century in other parts of South Texas remained in control in the ranching areas after the turn of the century. Jim Wells, the archetype of the South Texas political boss, maintained his hold on the Lower Valley into the twentieth century. The newcomer farmers, however, viewed the operations of the machines as insidiously anti-republican. They wanted local government to promote the interests of farmers. Throughout the 1910s, political battles raged between old-timers and newcomers over Mexican voting. The newcomers claimed that the machines bought Mexican votes and that only by eliminating this corruption could republican government come to the Lower Valley. Alba Heywood, a land speculator in the San Benito area of Cameron County, described this anti-machine feeling: “I do not think that the Mexican ignorance and the Mexican corruption that they talk so much about is our menace. I think our menace is the intelligence and shrewdness and corruption of the American men who lead them. And I don’t believe in spraying the leaves to cure citrus canker and don’t believe in cutting off the limb. . . . I think citrus canker, and we have political citrus canker, should be gone after as they go after citrus canker, and cut the tap root. Mine is the tap root theory.”5 The machines, eager to maintain their own control, did what they could to proceed as they always had, offering paternalistic protection to Mexicans and Mexican Americans while trying to hold off the political insurgencies erupting around them.

These battles were fought in two different ways. The first method, borrowed by the newcomers from the tactics of the Jim Crow South, was the

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5 Alba Heywood, “Proceedings of the Joint Committee of the Senate and House in the Investigation of the Texas Ranger Force,” 36th Legislature, Regular Session (January 14-March 19, 1919), Harbert Davenport Papers, TSA, 66. [Hereafter “Ranger Investigation”]
white primary. Maverick and Dimmit Counties, both located in the Winter Garden region southwest of San Antonio, instituted these exclusionary tactics in 1913 and 1914, respectively. The *Carrizo Springs Javelin* (Dimmit County) editorialized that “in times past the handling of the Mexican vote has not been such as would reflect any credit upon the people of the county,” before asking rhetorically, “Are you a white man standing with white men, or are you – well, something else?” After the White Man’s Primary Association succeeded in disfranchising Mexicans Americans in Dimmit, the *Javelin* waxed poetic: “the White Men’s Primary, by eliminating one of the most unscrupulous elements of local politics, will do much to give Dimmit County civic righteousness, and the people want it.” By denying the vote to Mexican Americans, attacking the weakest link in the structure of political control created by the machines, these newcomers forced the machines into a defensive position from which they could not recover. Mexican American voting rights were sacrificed at the altar of “progressive” political reform that put the control of county government in the hands of the new farming elite.

The second method, used by both sides, was the creation of new counties. From 1911 to 1921, the seven counties of the Lower Rio Grande Valley underwent a form of political mitosis to create a total of thirteen counties. Population growth had nothing to do with this subdivision – instead, new counties were created to avoid conflict between the two groups. The first two counties carved out of the original seven were Brooks and Jim Hogg, both established in

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6 *Carrizo Springs Javelin*, October 4, 1913, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
7 *Carrizo Springs Javelin*, May 8, 1914, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Taylor Collection.
1911. Brooks broke away from Starr County, a border ranching county which was firmly under the control of Jim Wells’ ally, Manuel Guerra. Likewise, Jim Hogg was created out of Zapata County, a machine stronghold and ranching county. White farmers controlled the politics of both new counties from the beginning.\(^8\)

A second wave of county subdivisions began almost immediately. Different than Brooks and Jim Hogg, however, these new counties were defensive bulwarks created by ranching interests to maintain some control and leave counties that had become increasingly farmer dominated. Willacy (1911), Jim Wells (1911), Kleberg (1913), and Kenedy (1921) Counties emerged out of old ranching areas of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Nueces Counties.\(^9\) In these new counties, the old machine practices continued, creating what were essentially isolated enclaves within a rapidly changing economic, social, and political environment.

In the realm of statewide politics, William Hobby’s entry into the Governor’s Mansion in 1917 as a mid-term replacement for the impeached James Ferguson gave the farm interests a strong ally in Austin. Hobby was a late convert to the Progressive wing of the state Democratic Party, but he emerged as a fervent opponent of the old political machines and a staunch ally of prohibitionists. Both sides prepared themselves for a clash in the 1918 elections, as Hobby ran against Ferguson for control of the state’s Democratic Party. Ferguson’s electoral hopes depended on the South Texas machines and the

\(^8\) Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 139-140.
\(^9\) Ibid., 140.
strongly anti-prohibition Germans in the Hill Country north of San Antonio.

Coming in the midst of World War I and the continued violence spawned by the Mexican Revolution, the Progressive forces united behind Hobby attacked their opponents as lackeys of the Kaiser and Mexican bandit leaders who sought to destroy republican government in Texas through insidious liquor-dealing and vote-buying. In this context, the interests of the state Progressive establishment coincided perfectly with farming elements in South Texas. Hand in hand, they launched a campaign of intimidation during the 1918 elections that sought to eliminate voting by Mexican Americans and thus destroy any remaining strongholds of machine power.

Not surprisingly, the Texas Rangers took a prominent role in these events. When Hobby took office in 1917 he appointed James Harley, a former state representative firmly within the Progressive camp, as his Adjutant General. In January 1918 Harley created the Loyalty Ranger Force under the command of Captain W.M. Hanson.¹⁰ Three men appointed from each county in Texas made up the Loyalty Rangers, whose purpose, according to Harley, was to “act as a Secret Service Department for the State, County, and Municipal officers in the execution of all State laws, especially House Bill No. 15, better known as the

¹⁰ Hanson, the captain of this newly created force, had spent the last several years of the Porfirian era in Mexico engaging in farming and oil investments. When the Revolution began, Hanson entered into the pay of the faltering Diaz regime, organizing a spy ring in Northern Mexico during 1911. After the fall of Diaz, Hanson remained in Mexico, trying to salvage what was left of his farming and oil interests. Carranza’s forces arrested Hanson in 1914, and after a court-martial, sentenced him to die. Pressure from the US consul saved him from execution, but he was forced to leave Mexico. Hanson continued to press for repayment of his losses for the next several years, but to no avail. Hanson’s anger at Mexico and Mexicans because of these events was so intense that one Ranger, later appointed as Adjutant General, hypothesized that Hanson had written the Plan de San Diego as a pretext to a race war. See Richard Henry Ribb, “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers: Myth, Identity, and Power in South Texas, 1900-1920,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 2001), 139-147.
‘Hobby Loyalty Act.’ Through the assistance of the Loyalty Secret Service Department this office has been advised as to Mexican revolutionary activities carried on, principally outside of San Antonio, and in the border counties in Mexico and this State.”

In fact, Loyalty Rangers served as a political bludgeon against enemies of Hobby and his wing of the state Democratic Party, especially in the Rangers’ traditional stomping grounds of South Texas. At the same time, Harley revoked all Special Ranger commissions granted by James Ferguson and replaced the entire force with his own appointees. By the time of the 1918 elections more than five hundred Hobby supporters received patronage positions within the Ranger Force, making any notion that the Rangers were an apolitical law enforcement body laughable. The group had merely switched patrons. Rather than the political bosses and their machines, the Rangers bowed to new masters: the farmers of South Texas and their elite allies in the rest of the state.

On primary day, July 27, 1918, Loyalty, Special, and regular Rangers swarmed around polling places across South Texas, making no secret of their efforts to dissuade Mexican Americans from voting. In Corpus Christi, Rangers threatened Chicanos with prison if they voted, while they functioned as menacing observers who tried to dissuade voters in Duval County from supporting local boss Archie Parr in his reelection bid for the state senate. Their strategy worked in the statewide elections, as Hobby won the nomination easily, outpolling

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11 James A. Harley, _Adjutant General Annual Report for 1918_, 7, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.
12 Not all political bosses received the same treatment from Hobby. Jim Wells and some of his associates supported Hobby in the primary against Ferguson, shielding themselves for the time being from the Progressive onslaught.
13 Ribb, “Jose Tomas Canales and the Texas Rangers,” 156.
Ferguson two-to-one in South Texas (which Ferguson won two-to-one two years earlier). Parr, however, thwarted these efforts in typical South Texas-style and managed to win the nomination in spite of the Rangers and opposition from Hobby, who rightly viewed Parr as a Ferguson partisan. His opponent, D.W. Glasscock, held a lead of 1,200 votes with all precincts but those in Duval County counted. Since Duval had fewer than one thousand registered voters, Hobby and the Progressives cried foul when Duval officials reported that Parr won the county by 1,280 votes (1,303 to 23).

Legal wrangling ensued, but the courts ruled in favor of Parr, undoubtedly due to pressure from Jim Wells. Glasscock responded with a write-in campaign, which had more of a chance of victory than running as a Republican in South Texas, hoping to reverse these results in the November general election. Openly working for Parr’s opponent, Harley sent the Rangers to interrogate “all questionable voters.” Seven days before the general election Hobby explicitly ordered his adjutant general to position Rangers throughout South Texas as a warning to try to dissuade the usual vote-getting practices of Parr and the machines. Rangers openly threatened Mexican American voters. In Alice, very near Parr’s home in San Diego, the number of votes dropped from three hundred in the primary to sixty-five in the general election. But it was all to no avail.

Despite the show of force and ham-handed attempts to block voting, Parr defeated Glasscock and retained his senate seat.15

Despite this setback, the 1918 elections marked an important turning point. Not only did Hobby and the Progressives maintain control of the Governor’s Mansion, but they helped further damage the machines through their blatantly partisan use of the Rangers. While Hobby remained nominally allied with Jim Wells in Cameron County and the Guerra family in Starr County, he and his allies made no secret of their desire to change the nature of politics in South Texas toward a system more responsive to farmers’ interests. Parr may have been their primary enemy, but all of the political bosses remained vulnerable as long as their political longevity relied on buying votes from the Mexican American majority. With the Rangers now firmly on the side of the farming interests, the machines found themselves caught between the new political ascendancy and their former constituents, whose memories of the genocidal violence of 1915-1916 had yet to fade, and who remained angry that nothing had been done to protect their voting rights. While the machines had already been on the decline, their deterioration accelerated in the aftermath of the 1918 elections and the conspicuous silence from the likes of Jim Wells and his associates.16 Only in isolated areas, such as Duval and Starr counties, did the machines maintain this support during the agricultural boom years of the 1920s.

The last gasp of the old machines in the farming counties came in 1928 with the so-called “Hidalgo County Rebellion.” Hidalgo County sheriff and

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16 Anders, Boss Rule in South Texas, 9-10.
former Texas Ranger, A.Y. Baker, maintained tenuous control of the county into the late 1920s. Newcomer farmers created a rival faction called the Good Government League to oust Baker’s allies in the 1928 elections. They especially coveted the position of county judge, the most powerful position in local South Texas government during these years. The machine counted the votes, however, and when the final tally went in favor of the GGL candidate, Baker threw out the ballot box from Weslaco, a town firmly in the control of newcomers since its founding in 1921. After complaints about these irregularities, the US Congress investigated the episode and found evidence of illegal activities. When the case went to trial, Baker was found guilty of falsifying election results, but before sentencing he disappeared, never to be seen again. It is still not known what happened to Baker, but his disappearance symbolized the definitive end of the machine era.\(^\text{17}\)

As the machines faded, most overt sentiment in favor of Mexican American voting rights disappeared. Interviewed several years later, Asherton farmer Littleton Richardson explained that the political bosses “used to give the Mexicans whiskey and free meals for thirty days before election. As a result they got no work done during that time. So to put a stop to the whole thing they organized the white man’s primary.”\(^\text{18}\) Since these newcomers hated Mexican American voting and interruptions in their workforce with equal ferocity, they responded in what they deemed the only way to make sure that neither happened again. In 1923 the state legislature, bowing to pressure from East Texas interests

\(^{17}\) Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 147-148.
\(^{18}\) Littleton Richardson, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 16, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
looking to shore up protections against African American voters and South Texas interests eager to do the same with Mexican Americans, made the white primary statewide. Mexican American voters were not entirely eliminated by this legislation, but when combined in the years to come with poll taxes and other similar measures, it did effectively cripple voting strength throughout the region for decades to come even as Mexican American majorities expanded.

There were exceptions, of course. The Taft Ranch, for instance, continued to operate in the exact same manner as the disgraced machines had. Managers and foremen instructed their workers not to "make up their minds on politics until they had heard from the management." The company paid all poll taxes for its employees, then recovered the money by garnishing wages. They herded workers to the polls on election day, and dictated for whom they would vote. Thus Mexican American voting aroused little anger when it benefited agribusiness interests, especially in areas where farmers still sought to wrest control over opposing political factions. As farming interests took unquestioned control, however, they simply phased out the tactics they learned from the machines and pushed Mexicans and Mexican Americans out of the political realm while still relying on them in the economic realm.

In many counties, good government leagues simply created a new form of political machine, built wholly on the principle of exclusion rather than the delicate parasitic relationships that underlay the power of the older political bosses. Clothing disfranchisement in the rhetoric of progressivism, these new

machines depicted themselves as redeemer of the political system who would return control back to the rightful leaders. Beneath these empty exaltations of civic righteousness, however, lay the same threats of violence that had always remained just below the surface in South Texas, made especially resonant by the memories of genocidal war less than a generation earlier. South Texas Anglos seemed to agree with a resident of Dimmit County interviewed by Paul Taylor: “There isn’t much probability of the Mexicans taking enough interest to vote. If they did, first some plan would be devised by law to keep them from voting. Second, if that could not be done there might be calamity from a physical standpoint and there might be some dead Mexicans.”

Relying on legal maneuvering and the specter of violence, these new political elites constructed local and regional political dynasties that remained largely unchallenged until the 1970s, when democracy finally came to South Texas.

Along with these changes in the political order came an even more important restructuring of the social system that mirrored the enforced political powerlessness of the Chicano majority. When farming interests captured political control of an area, they immediately set about implementing a system of segregation that went beyond the residential segregation that had long been a fact of life in the region. According to David Montejano, segregation “was not merely a natural unfolding of previous foundations or legacies – not just an immigration of more prejudiced Anglos or an assimilation of the old. This was a new society, with new class groups and class relations, with the capacity to generate an

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‘indigenous’ rationale for the ordering of people.”21 “Outside the social order but a necessary part of it,” continued Montejano, “Mexicans were attached to the new agricultural society through the construction of separate and subordinate institutions that rigidly defined their position as farm laborers.”22

A rigid, seemingly unquestioned tautology justified this social separation. The powerlessness of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, though often achieved through violence, became the justification for their banishment from full citizenship within the farm society. Conversely, their supposed unfitness for full citizenship validated their political and economic powerlessness. Clearly, economic considerations, manifested in racist feeling as a further subconscious rationalization, determined the hierarchical structure of this new agricultural society. Beyond simple racism, then, the farmers of South Texas created a system they deemed utilitarian in its stark simplicity that guaranteed a reliable, cheap workforce whose basic rights remained an abstraction to be ignored whenever convenient.

The general attitudes expressed by Anglo residents of South Texas during these years exhibited just this kind of earnest belief in the rationality of their system, with some even going so far as to celebrate the perfection of this recently constructed arrangement. G.A. Tallmadge, a farmer near Corpus Christi originally from Milwaukee, scolded labor economist Paul Taylor for what he deemed to be the scholar’s lack of enthusiasm for what he observed in South Texas: “Don’t come down here from the north and describe the poverty of the

21 Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 162.
22 Ibid., 195-196.
Mexicans at the back door of the white man’s high civilization. Don’t forget that he’s an independent individual. There never lived a person in such freedom.”

Tallmadge continued his admonishment, complaining that Taylor and others should not “get to pitying the Mexican and depreciating the white people holding him in subjection. He wouldn’t have it any other way. The white man will cuss the Mexican, and then in the evening, on the cattle ranches, he’s down by the fire with him, with the frying pan, and eating tortillas with his coffee. There never was a grander companionship between men.”

Likewise, John Stone, an onion grower in Carrizo Springs, viewed the wages he offered as charitable: “We have to have the Mexicans as cheap labor. We carry them when things are tight; they won’t save. They owe me about $500 now, and I will lose about half of it. I can’t afford to pay them high wages, and then carry them when times are tight. I wish they would save for themselves, but it isn’t in their nature to do it.” Any more money, claimed Stone, would ruin the workers. Not willing to leave it at that, however, Stone continued:

The Mexican is getting paid two bits too much; he gets from $1.50 to $2.00 a day. He should get about $1. When he has a dollar in his pocket he won’t work. You get more onions transplanted at 5 cents a row than you do at 10 cents. It’s just the nature of the Mexican. He needs about $8 a week if he has a family, for clothes, shoes, and food. What a Mexican should be paid is just enough to live on, with maybe a dollar or two to spend. That’s all he deserves. If he is paid any more he won’t work so much; or when we need him, he’s able to wait around until we have to raise the price above what’s legitimate.

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23 G.A. Tallmadge, interviewed by Paul Taylor, September 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
24 G.A. Tallmadge, interviewed by Paul Taylor, September 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
25 John Stone, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 8, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
26 John Stone, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 8, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
Stone’s attitude was typical of the other newcomer farmers who viewed interethnic relations through the lens of economics, deciding that what was best for their bottom line necessarily had to be best for everyone. In such an atmosphere, it is no surprise that a Nueces County tenant farmer proudly declared, “I have only hit three Mexicans in eight years and I consider that a pretty good record.” Nor that a Dimmit County farmer stated, “We feel toward the Mexicans just like toward the nigger, but not so much.”

As farm towns sprouted throughout the region in the late 1910s and 1920s, segregation followed in the immediate aftermath of the town’s founding. While most public accommodations in these towns practiced some form of segregation, it was school segregation that was most telling of the nature of this society. As David Montejano argued, “Segregated schools were a straightforward reflection of the racial divisions of the farm towns.” Some towns built schools solely for use by Mexicans and Mexican Americans, while others secluded students in different classrooms within the same building, but the basic pattern remained the

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27 Not so typical was another statement by Stone, in which he seems to revel in coercing Mexican and African American women into sex, further revealing the dehumanization necessary to rationalize this kind of social system: “We favor a Mexican more than we do a negro. You can get more work out of a negro, but a Mexican is a better citizen. You never heard of a case of rape by a Mexican; it happens all the time with the negroes. And a Mexican respects a white man; you can do anything you want with their women; their men won’t attack you; of course some of the better educated Texas-Mexicans would just as soon go after you. With the negro women you can do anything you want if you just get them off from the rest; the Mexican women will never say yes; you just have to go ahead or you’ll get left. Some of the Mexican men seem to feel it an honor that a white man will pay that much attention to their women.” John Stone, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 8, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.


29 Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 422.


31 Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 168.
same throughout the region. Segregation’s defenders supported school separation in the same terms as they did labor relations. They claimed that separation was good for Mexicans because it kept them from directly competing with Anglos, while also stressing that it protected Anglo children from intimate contact with Mexican children.

John Stone summarized these general feelings in his interview with Paul Taylor: “Reasons for separation? They’re low morally, and many of their children aren’t clean; either they would be left behind by the faster progress of the white children, or the white children would be held back. The Mexicans could go to the white schools if they knew enough and insisted; they’re Caucasians. But they are satisfied; they know that the white children would make it pretty hard for the Mexican children and would probably get the best of them.” Similarly, when Paul Taylor asked an Anglo tenant farmer why the nearest school refused to admit Mexicans, he roared back, “Because a damned greaser is not fit to sit side of a white girl. Anybody who wants to get in trouble around here can just try to put them in the same school. A man would rather his daughter was dead than that she should marry a Mexican. The Mexicans are too dirty and filthy. If they separate in school the children learn the difference and they won’t mix with the Mexicans. Of course, if they contend for it, we will either have to take them into the school or else build them another.”

32 African Americans, however, were always secluded to separate schools, despite the fact that their numbers were always low in South Texas.
33 John Stone, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 8, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
34 Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 389.
In addition to these predictable defenses of segregation, however, some supporters made no pretense of hiding the fact that they used separation as a way to further subsidize Anglo schools. Similar to African American schools in the Southeast, funds received from the state for Mexican schools went almost entirely into the white educational system. A school superintendent in Nueces County stated unapologetically that “Mexicans in this district draw about $6,000 state aid, and we spend on them about $2,000. This is true everywhere in Texas. We also have an $18,000 property tax and that all goes to the white school.”35 A Winter Garden farmer, likewise, readily admitted that the “school board uses the money it gets from the state for the Mexican scholastics on the white school. If they didn’t have to they wouldn’t have any school for the Mexicans. When you say anything to them about it, their attitude is ‘oh well, they’re Mexicans.’”36

Another important aspect of the educational system in these farming towns was the lack of any attempt to enforce compulsory attendance laws. While this could be seen as a result of the general apathy toward the educational needs of the Mexican American population, it had much more to do with issues of labor availability. To be sure, the entire state of Texas tended to ignore compulsory attendance laws, but in rural South Texas local governments made no pretense of enforcing these laws that had the potential to take child labor out of the fields.37 Paul Taylor estimated that at no time during the year did more than twenty-five percent of Mexican children between the ages of seven and seventeen attend

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36 Littleton Richardson, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 16, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
37 Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 372.
school in Dimmit County, while the average attendance rate was much lower than that. Among those Mexican and Mexican American children who did attend school regularly, they often found themselves on vacation weeks earlier than white students so that they could work in the fields. The "Mexican schools" in Nueces County, for instance, finished their school year a month early so that students could be put to work chopping cotton. Thus, these segregated schools acted as little more than places to warehouse potential field laborers during the off-season. When added to the fact that many of these children had to travel with the rest of their families on the migrant trail for months, it can hardly be surprising that most Mexican and Mexican American children did not make it as far as the fifth grade. Far from accidental, this system developed as an intentional aspect of the ethnic/labor relations regime established by farmers who felt that "education they get in the schools here spoils them, and makes them trifling; they become peddlers, or bootleggers, or seek some easy of making a living." Freedom from hard work, apparently, was a right earned only by the farmowners.

The larger towns and cities of South Texas did not have a system of segregation quite as rigid as the farm towns, but conditions in places like San Antonio, Laredo, Eagle Pass, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville largely mirrored what was happening in the small towns of the Winter Garden, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the other farming areas. Still, many in these farm towns pointed to San Antonio and the other large towns as places where Mexicans and

38 Ibid.
39 Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 201.
40 John Stone, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 8, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
Anglos associated too freely, such as the farmer in Carrizo Springs who stated disapprovingly that “in San Antonio and Laredo and some other places they do vote and go to the same schools. But not here.”\textsuperscript{41} Likewise, a school board member in Dimmit County explained, “Politics is the reason for mixing of Americans and Mexicans in San Antonio and Laredo. There they can’t offend the Mexicans.”\textsuperscript{42} Despite these estimations of the overly egalitarian atmosphere of San Antonio, however, a rigid pattern of residential segregation accomplished the same kind of social separation. Restrictive covenants and other similar measures forced most Mexicans and Mexican Americans into the city’s increasingly overcrowded West Side. With residential segregation accomplished, city leaders merely had to draw school district lines in such a way that created \textit{de facto}, if not \textit{de jure}, educational segregation.\textsuperscript{43}

The results of this residential segregation in San Antonio, however, could be dire. The lack of proper sanitation facilities such as running water and sewage lines in much of San Antonio’s West Side slum created an acute public health crisis that continued to fester under the noses of the city’s Anglo leadership. Tuberculosis rates among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the city dwarfed those among Anglos and African Americans, which themselves were high by national standards. A local publication described the neighborhoods of the West Side as mired in “[p]rimitive conditions that beggar description . . . Living

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\textsuperscript{41} Mr. Baylor, interviewed by Paul Taylor, November 30, 1928, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 13, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.  \\
\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 390.  \\
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conditions actually below those of the cattle in some of San Antonio's modern dairies are used as human habitations in many instances, and whole sections are so lacking in sanitary provisions as to form an actual health menace." As the population grew throughout these years, the newcomers found themselves stacked on top of new neighbors, trapped within a corner of a city that refused to allow their physical expansion into the North or South Side. Ramshackle, dilapidated housing littered this bounded section of town, leaving the population susceptible to natural disaster. In the midst of the farm boom south of the city, the residents of the West Side found themselves victims of a massive flood that swept through the central and western portions of the city on the night of September 9, 1921.

As Mike Davis argued in his study of ecological catastrophe in Los Angeles, concepts such as “average rainfall” are abstractions that mean nothing in a climate like San Antonio and South Texas. Instead, “high-intensity, low-frequency events (‘disasters’) are the ordinary agents of landscape and ecological change.” More specifically, South Texas has always shifted back and forth between drought and flood, with little time spent in an intermediate position between the two. Not surprisingly, the West Side of San Antonio was the area of the city most prone to flooding. When exacerbated by the lack of sturdy housing or reliable sewage and water services, the potential for catastrophe was constant, even if ignored. While the San Antonio River and its many tributaries usually maintained low flow levels, when floods did occur they could become raging

44 "How the Mexican Lives," *Texas Argus* (San Antonio), January 1928, Box 2, Folder 11, Oliver Douglas Weeks Papers, League of United Latin American Citizens Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas-Austin.
torrents that, before flood control came during the 1930s, ripped through districts adjacent to the river and its network of creeks.

Beginning on Wednesday, September 9, 1921, heavy rain pounded the Hill Country north of San Antonio, dramatically raising the water level in Olmos Creek and the San Antonio River. The rain continued unabated until Friday night, when in a matter of a few hours almost eight inches of rain fell on the city and the area to its immediate north. This torrent of water roared into the San Antonio River, bursting its banks that night. Water from the river and swollen creeks combined with the water already running in the streets of downtown and the West Side to create a fast-moving, twenty-foot-high, half-mile-wide surge of water that destroyed hundreds of homes and killed an unknown number of people. When the water finally receded, a zone two miles long and a half-mile wide had been destroyed, with buildings swept away and human and animal corpses buried among the massive piles of debris. According to the *New York Times*, the path of destruction included the “heart of the business section . . . as well as the thickly populated west side, where today thousands of Mexicans are homeless and the dead not yet counted.” Poorly-constructed hovels and rickety tenements had no chance of holding up against the flood waters, turning the segregated barrio of the West Side into a temporary flood basin that assured heavy loss of life. Like the

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48 “40 Known Dead, Fear 250 Perished, In Flood that Sweeps San Antonio; Property Loss is Put at $3,000,000,” *New York Times* (September 11, 1921).
49 The mayor of San Antonio, continuing the long tradition of utterly inept leadership with which the city has long been cursed, sent a telegram to the *New York Times* stating, “Condition in San
Ninth Ward of New Orleans or the hillside slums surrounding Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City, the Chicano West Side remained under the constant threat of natural disaster. Political elites ignored these hazards, however, because the area’s population was deemed racially and economically inconsequential.

These same rains trailed death behind them outside of San Antonio as well. In Williamson and Milam counties, north of Austin, more than a hundred died when the San Gabriel River burst its banks and flooded surrounding low-lying areas. Almost all of the dead were Mexican and Mexican American migrant farm workers forced to live in temporary housing in the lowlands along the rivers and tributaries in the region. In the crossroads town of Thorndale sixty-five bodies were recovered, all of them Mexican or Mexican American. On a single farm near Elm Grove twenty-nine Mexican farm workers died. Only two Anglos died in these Central Texas floods. Similar to their brethren in San Antonio, these Mexican and Mexican American farm workers had, in the words of Mike Antonio is exaggerated. The loss of life is less than fifty. . . . The city is able to care for itself and does not need outside help.” “Outside Aid Not Needed, San Antonio Mayor Wires,” New York Times (September 12, 1921). Another questionable decision made by the city government was the installation of wooden blocks coated in asphalt on many of the busiest streets downtown shortly before the 1921 flood. The streets of Philadelphia used the same materials, but in a city as flood-prone as San Antonio it was just a matter of time before the blocks, much lighter than normal paving stones, floated away to serve as projectiles to batter people and buildings caught within the flood waters.

For a brilliant recent study of the expanding importance and precarious existence of slums on a global scale, see Mike Davis, Planet of Slums (New York: Verso, 2006), especially “Slum Ecology,” 121-150.

A political machine very much in the tradition of Tammany Hall maintained control of San Antonio throughout these years. There were Progressive attempts to topple the machine that ran the city since the late 19th century, but these efforts did little more than force the machine to slightly alter its methods of operation. This machine will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, but for now it will suffice to say that it remained in charge of the city until the 1950s (the Maury Maverick government in the late 1930s being the only exception), when a group called the Good Government League seized control of the city and operated it in the Progressive machine manner.

Davis, “little choice but to live with disaster.” Such was the logical conclusion of the practice of segregation in South Texas.

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The political domination wielded by farm interests allowed them to institute and enforce the residential and educational segregation that both reflected and maintained the caste-like social separation between Chicanos and Anglos in South Texas. But their financial and political success bred anxiety. As farm workers became more mobile and extended their seasonal migrations well beyond the state borders of Texas, farm owners and their allies in South Texas worried that their low-wage surplus labor pool could disappear, drawn away by promises of higher wages elsewhere. In the midst of spectacular growth in their own farm profits, they worried that sugar beet corporations, northern manufacturing concerns, the enhanced availability of cheap automobiles, and a number of other factors had begun to sow the seeds of the collapse of agriculture in South Texas. Whether these concerns emerged out of paranoia, greed, or legitimate concerns over the sustainability of the growth of the boom years, South Texas agriculturalists looked to immobilize these workers to make sure that harvest surpluses never disappeared and that wages stayed low. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, farmers and politicians experimented with a number of methods to achieve these goals, leading them to create a wide array of measures designed to undercut and erase the free labor rights of Mexican and Mexican farm workers.

As David Montejano has argued, “This desire for cheap but temporary labor, however, entailed an internal tension. Temporary wage labor meant that

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53 Davis, Planet of Slums, 122.
laborers had to be mobile. Mobility for the laborer, in turn, meant that Mexicans could work for the highest bidder for their labor."54 Farmers did not want to live up to the reciprocal requirements of traditional patron-client relationships, so they devised labor controls that sought to undercut the migratory reality of agricultural labor while maintaining by any means necessary the low wages that made agriculture in South Texas so profitable. What emerged, according to Montejano, was an "inchoate web of labor controls in rural Texas: a varied county response to the Mexican labor problem and the absence of an inter-county organization which could co-ordinate the movement of Mexican labor. This labor repression in Texas consisted of a set of ineffective and inefficient labor controls."55

The level of sophistication of these measures varied, with methods reminiscent of slavery existing side-by-side with much more subtle, legally-sanctioned schemes of guaranteeing seasonal labor surpluses without the messy problems that came along with bondage. Peonage remained the most basic method of controlling labor, and its use continued throughout the farm boom of the 1910s and 1920s. It obviously carried a number of liabilities with it, but with unquestioned political and economic dominance within their home counties, many farmers viewed forms of bondage as a simple way to guarantee overabundant labor, even if it lacked the elegance of the schemes used elsewhere. Some local variants of this pattern included whipping or other forms of physical abuse.56 Such was the treatment described, and seemingly justified, by a Dimmit County

55 Ibid., 31. See also Emilio Zamora, The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 30.
56 Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 201.
resident to Paul Taylor: "The old frontiersmen think nothing of killing a Mexican. . . . They used to say, 'kill them off on payday and get some more Mexicans.'" 57

Likewise, workers who tried to leave farms in Gonzales County (between San Antonio and Austin) before the harvest ended found themselves chained to a post and guarded by men with shotguns. 58

Others, however, maintained the threat of violence without actually resorting to physical coercion. The conspicuous presence of heavily armed guards was ubiquitous throughout rural Texas, as well as in the centers of recruitment like San Antonio and Laredo. Contractors and farmers feared the enticement of their workers en route to the farms, leading them to borrow tactics from the armed guards of southern prison farms or the overseers of the slave plantations. 59 One emigrant from Jalisco described these measures as practiced in Nueces County:

We were supposed to be paid $1.50 a hundred pounds for picking cotton, but we received only $4 or $5 a week in cash. We were paid partly in money and partly in credit at the ranch store, and the prices at the store were high. Some of my friends left, and caused much disgust to the farmer. So they gathered the rest of us in the garage and posted the mayordomo at the door with a rifle. Then the owner came with a pistol and threatened to kill any man who left. 60

While this man eventually left the Nueces County farm, he later took a job as a sharecropper on halves at another cotton farm in the same county, but was driven from his tract before picking without any pay after a disagreement with the owner's wife. Rather than fall victim to these practices again, he simply returned

57 Quoted in Taylor, "Dimmit County," 433.
58 McWilliams, North from Mexico, 165-166.
59 Ibid.
More subtle than these methods in Nueces County, but seemingly also less successful, were the practices described by a former labor scout for farmers near Laredo: “We used to take their shoes and hats and put them in another house, but they got away from us anyway in 1919, and we used to even guard each door of the houses they slept in on a big farm. We used to put wives separate from the husbands, but the men left their wives to come north.”

In many areas, however, a more subtle, if no less coercive, system of labor controls emerged that drew on the connivance of political and law enforcement officials ignoring blatant violations of a number of laws. One early example of this occurred with the construction of a dam on the Medina River, forty miles west of San Antonio, for irrigation purposes at the very beginning of the farm boom in 1911 and 1912. The Alamo Cement Company of San Antonio recruited workers from Mexico in direct violation of the alien contract labor law for both the production of cement and the construction of the dam for the Medina Dam and Irrigation Company. According to a labor contractor who later contacted the Department of Justice to report illegal activities by his competitors, the labor agency hired by Alamo Cement and the Medina Company “had no difficulty getting the men across, because he tipped the guards who were named

61 Taylor, Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community, 49-50.
63 The dam and irrigation company were underwritten with British capital.
‘Frenchy’ and Benavides” at Laredo.\textsuperscript{64} Despite this testimony, but not surprisingly, there was no prosecution for violation of contract labor law.\textsuperscript{65}

In addition, however, the Department of Justice received complaints of violations of anti-peonage statutes at the Medina Dam shortly after they first investigated the immigration issues. The Mexican Consul General at San Antonio, Manuel Esteva, reported instances of peonage at the Medina site. The \textit{Carrizo Springs Javelin} registered its typical acerbic denunciation of any attempt to protect Mexicans:

The Mexican consul at San Antonio is registering a large kick on the treatment he alleges his unfortunate countrymen receive from the large contractors of labor, and we understand that he has appealed to the state department for redress. He states that the Mexicans are held in a state of peonage, and are maltreated in other ways. The Medina dam contractors are among the people complained of. In this immediate section it is a hard job to get the hombres to do the work they are paid for, much less get them to do work they are not paid for. We might file a complaint with the consul to see if that situation might not be relieved also.\textsuperscript{66}

These reports from the Consul General went to the assistant U.S. Attorney in San Antonio, Charles Cresson, who ignored the case and reported to Justice Department Special Agents that there was no merit in the peonage cases.\textsuperscript{67} In addition to his position as assistant U.S. Attorney, however, Cresson was also the Second Vice President of, chief counsel for, and stockholder in the Medina Dam

\textsuperscript{64} Casefile 50-394 (163721), frames 500-519, Reel 18, \textit{Department of Justice Peonage Files, 1901-1945} (microfilm).

\textsuperscript{65} Commissioner-General of Immigration to Samuel Gompers, January 16, 1912, File 52546/31D, Box 671, Record Group 85, Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives, Washington, DC.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Carrizo Springs Javelin}, September 7, 1912, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 23, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.

\textsuperscript{67} A. Bruce Bielaski to Attorney General, November 20, 1912, Casefile 50-394 (163721), frames 496-499, Reel 18, \textit{DOJ Peonage Files}. 
and Irrigation Company. By the time the Justice Department even discovered these conflicts of interest the construction of the dam ended and Cresson was free to enjoy the profits flowing out of the irrigation works made possible by his shielding of the company from possible prosecution. In such a situation, it was hard, if not impossible, to determine where farm enterprises ended and the supposed guarantors of political order began. Cresson and the Medina Dam were just one of many examples of that peculiar brand of Lone Star "democracy" that endured beyond the farm boom of the early twentieth century to still infect the state to this day with endless examples of shady transactions, insider trading, and unsavory deal-making.

A related method of labor control relied on timely and racially-determined enforcement of vagrancy laws, again reminiscent of labor practices in the cotton belt of the Southeast. The best example of this system operated in Willacy County, just north of Cameron County in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In what came to be known as the "Raymondville Peonage Cases" the outlines of a plan emerged in which farmers and the top officials of the county government conspired to immobilize farm workers. The farmers contracted laborers under terms that changed once they arrived in Willacy County. Those who refused to

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68 Bielaski to Attorney General, November 20, 1912, DOJ Peonage Files.
70 Obviously, these methods were not unique to South Texas. Carey McWilliams pointed out similar systems in California, including a statement from the State Council of Defense in 1918 that "urged the passage of a more drastic law against vagrants as a means to compel men who are offered employment in orchards and farms to accept such work under penalty of prosecution." McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 180-181.
work, similar to the case of Elias Garza at the beginning of this chapter, were arrested for vagrancy and charged twice the cost of their transportation. Those arrested were then forced to work off their debt by picking cotton, under armed guard, for the farmer who originally recruited them. Willacy County officials supplemented this labor supply by also arresting any farm laborers unfortunate enough to be caught traveling through the county during harvest season. In addition, there was also a "pass system" during the harvest that forbade any farm worker from leaving the county without the permission of the farm-owners. Not surprisingly, vagrancy charges and convict labor followed violation of the pass law for anyone unlucky enough to get caught up within this machinery of peonage. Thus, the cotton farmers of Willacy County had a virtually free work force that was legally-sanctioned through the connivance of county law enforcement. Almost all of these "vagrants" were Mexicans or Mexican Americans, but a few Anglos found themselves caught within this web. In fact, the prosecutions that eventually ended this system arose out of two Anglos arrested for vagrancy and put to work in the fields.71

The prosecutions of the Willacy County peonage cases sent chills throughout South Texas. Reactions often echoed the feeling that growers "have to watch out for the peonage law now, so it almost requires a lawyer to keep out of the laws."72 Another respondent, quick to forget the nature of the prosecutions, complained, "We feel we need some sort of law to protect us. The Mexican ought

71 Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 205; Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 149.
72 Taylor, American-Mexican Frontier, 149. See also Mr. Miller, interviewed by Paul Taylor, September 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 23, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
to have to live up to his contract; it wouldn’t hurt labor.”\(^{73}\) Another man complained that farmers “ought to be able to make them work out their debt. The peonage cases were extreme. There was a labor shortage in 1926. They don’t generally do that.”\(^{74}\) Beyond this collective hand-wringing, however, angry farmers found the time to beat one of the primary witnesses for the prosecution outside his home in Raymondville, and then throw a party for the sheriff of Willacy County upon his release from prison.\(^{75}\)

Taken together, these methods of immobilizing labor certainly inconvenienced and probably intimidated many workers, but they did little to stop worker mobility. As the Willacy County system hummed along during the boom years of the 1920s, tens of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans left Texas for employment elsewhere. For those unfortunate enough to find themselves caught within the web of labor control, however, the system probably did not seem as porous as it does in hindsight. Even if the system failed in some respects, it accomplished the ultimate goal of maintaining a region-wide surplus labor pool without allowing wages to rise.

In addition to measures that targeted the workers themselves, there was also a parallel set of strictures meant to protect farmers in South Texas from contractors and labor agents seeking to entice workers away with promises of higher wages. Like the methods for stripping workers of their rights to free labor, anti-enticement schemes varied from simple to complex, from covering single farms to operating statewide. At the local level, anti-enticement efforts often

\(^{73}\) Quoted in Ibid., 149.
\(^{74}\) Quoted in Ibid., 150.
\(^{75}\) Taylor, *American-Mexican Frontier*, 150.
resulted in simple threats to labor contractors, sometimes of the verbal variety.\textsuperscript{76} In most cases, these measures were informal just as often as not, enforced by individual farmers or farmers' associations rather than by means of law enforcement (though we have already seen how difficult it can be to differentiate between the two).\textsuperscript{77}

By the mid-1920s, however, the increased attention paid to South Texas labor by northern agricultural and manufacturing interests, combined with demands to maintain the growth in the agricultural economy, created intense pressures to protect these farmers against the poaching of labor agents.\textsuperscript{78} One example of these conflicts unfolded between 1926 and 1929 in the Winter Garden. Farming developed later around the town of Catarina than in the rest of the region. Its late settlement and development meant that its population was almost entirely made up of recent arrivals from the North. When production around Catarina reached substantial levels around 1926, these farmers drew much of their labor from nearby towns, primarily Asherton and its longer-settled population, through Mexican American labor contractors. The farmers of Asherton complained, "Part of the trouble is due to the northern people with money and big acreages who don't know how to handle the Mexicans like the southerners. They offer them too high wages. The Mexicans are not cheap labor.

\textsuperscript{76} McWilliams, \textit{Ill Fares the Land}, 253; McWilliams, \textit{North from Mexico}, 167-168.
\textsuperscript{77} As will be seen in the next chapter, these extra-legal anti-enticement efforts only increased during the Great Depression as dropping prices drove growers to more extreme measures to guarantee surplus labor.
\textsuperscript{78} There was also a letter circulated by the Nueces County Council of Defense in 1918 that warned, "You shall inform the farmers of your community that efforts and schemes on the part of farmers to get labor away from their neighbors by offering them higher prices or other inducements, will not be tolerated by this organization. You will let it be known in your community that such underhanded action on the part of any person will be considered as an unpatriotic and disloyal act." Quoted in Zamora, \textit{World of the Mexican Worker in Texas}, 39.
any more.” 79 Another complained that the “northerners who settled here were somewhat shocked at the $1 and $1.25 a day wages. The Mexicans are worth only about $1.25, but the Mexican contractors are shrewd, and they steam them up to pay more.” 80 To stop the exodus of their workers to the distant fields twelve miles away in Catarina, the Asherton growers turned to the state judiciary. “We got an injunction from Judge Mullally in Laredo against Mexican contractors of Catarina who were paid big bonuses to come and get our labor,” explained an Asherton resident, before incorrectly asserting, “There’s a law in Texas against taking labor out of a community where there’s a shortage there.” 81 Examining this episode, Paul Taylor noted, “This reliance on some device hampering to one’s competitor and to the movement of labor is characteristic in south Texas.” 82

While northerners in their midst certainly alarmed the farmers of South Texas, much more frightening for them were the northern agricultural and industrial concerns who transported their workers far beyond the borders of the state, with the sugar beet corporations as public enemy number one. 83 Growers and politicians in Texas were unanimous in arguing loudly that the increased poaching of labor by northern interests and their labor contractors threatened the continued expansion, even the very existence, of the agricultural economy of South Texas. The Texas Farm Placement Service, looking back on these years,

80 Ibid., 330.
81 Morris Dupree, interviewed by Paul Taylor, April 10, 1929, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 14, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
82 Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 331. See also McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 253.
83 Texas growers had long been fighting to keep their workers from drifting away to do railroad work, but the low wages available as a track worker always made this little more than a slight irritant compared to the competition of the sugar beet growers and other far-away opportunities in the 1920s.
declared that blame for this situation lay with labor contractors: "He had no regard for seasonal needs of Texas farmers. If he could persuade the migrants to start for the Michigan beet fields or elsewhere, so much the worse for Texas farmers if the labor supply was short. The emigrant agent very soon became one of the most serious problems in Texas labor." Others put the blame on the northern interests who employed both the contractors and the workers, such as a Texas farmer who testified before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1926: "Whenever the beet growers of the various States of the Union come to south Texas for laborers to harvest their crops, they are taking them away from us, leaving us in an even worse condition than before, when they could find a supply of labor in eastern cities for their beet fields."

In the 1920s these fears of contractors run-amok combined with strong efforts to limit immigration into the United States, raising fears that the workers sent north could no longer be replaced by new immigrants if outside political forces decided to close the border. The Texas Labor Commissioner pointed toward Mexico as the only source of respite for Texas farmers, arguing, "The tendency on the part of farm labor to leave agricultural pursuits for wage opportunities afforded in commercial and industrial centers is fast approaching a tragedy and farmers complain they are unable to meet competitive wage scales offered in the urban labor markets. This can only be remedied and is being remedied by hiring Mexican labor whose standard of living is far below the

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American worker.\textsuperscript{86} Therefore, with their immigrant workforce now threatened, Texas farmers and politicians looked to outlaw the contracting of labor for employment in other states.\textsuperscript{87}

These efforts culminated in the Emigrant Labor Agency Law of 1929.\textsuperscript{88} Supported by the American Federation of Labor, the South Texas Chamber of Commerce, the Winter Garden Chamber of Commerce, and a number of other groups interested in keeping Mexican and Mexican American workers in Texas, the law was introduced by A.P. Johnson, the state representative from Carrizo Springs.\textsuperscript{89} The original version of the law charged a $7,500 occupation tax to any contractor wishing to send workers out of Texas, thereby criminalizing all non-licensed contracting. In addition, county taxes and the required posting of a $5,000 return bond for each worker in the counties of recruitment added additional substantial financial obstacles.\textsuperscript{90} A federal court soon struck down the $7,500 fee after Michigan sugar beet corporations petitioned, but the legislature quickly replaced it with a $1,000 occupation tax.\textsuperscript{91}

The proponents of this law believed that Texas and its farmers had a natural right to Mexican workers that superseded the needs or rights of the rest of

\textsuperscript{87} Slightly more charitable was a man named "Stubbs" interviewed by Paul Taylor at the Chamber of Commerce in Robstown, near Corpus Christi, who stated, "They should let the four border states have the Mexicans, and not let them go north." Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 27, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley.
\textsuperscript{88} Similar bills had been passed in 1923 and 1925, but had done little to slow the flow of workers heading north as their wording dealt more with charges of exploitation by labor agencies rather than explicitly attempting to outlaw emigration to the North, as was undertaken with the 1929 law.
\textsuperscript{89} Montejano, Race, Labor Repression, and Capitalist Agriculture, 33-34; Taylor, "Dimmit County," 331.
\textsuperscript{91} Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 210-213.
the nation. In an illuminating statement, the Emigrant Labor Agency Law’s chief sponsor, A.P. Johnson, justified the bill on the grounds of these supposed rights, while also clearly pointing to the threat of the eventual end of emigration from Mexico: “It is the same situation as where you have had a stream of water running through your ranch. If someone turns its source off you want to put up a dam to hold what you have got.” Similarly, a Nueces County farmer declared, “We got a law passed to keep the Mexicans in Texas and out of the beets. The border states need a temporary passport from Mexicans; put a boundary on Texas.” In theory, then, Texas farmers had insulated themselves for the time being from both out-of-state labor migrations and the looming threat of immigration restrictions on Mexicans.

In practice, however, the Emigrant Labor Agency Law was not the insurmountable obstacle hoped for by its proponents. According to J.R. Steelman, the Director of Mediation for the U.S. Department of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt,

[The Emigrant Labor Agency Law] is circumvented in several ways, chiefly by the “grapevine.” In this the labor agents merely stop in at gas stations and pool rooms and spread the word that much work at fine wages is to be had in such and such a place. It is amazingly effective. Agents are also posted at highway junctions to “direct the flow” to the cotton areas needing labor. Signs are put up along the highways. Newspaper advertisements are extensively used, and bring some results.

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92 Clearly, however, this belief pre-dated the farm boom of the 1910s and 1920s, as discussed in previous chapters.
93 A.P. Johnson, quoted in Montejano, Race, Labor Repression, and Capitalist Agriculture, 34.
94 Ibid., 35.
95 J.R. Steelman to Frances Perkins, March 24, 1938, Record Group 174, General Records of the Department of Labor, Office of the Secretary, Secretary Frances Perkins, General Subject File, 1933-1941, National Archives, College Park, MD. Emphasis in original.
In addition, the law included a loophole that exempted “private” contractors, meaning those who worked for only one client, from the law. Thus, labor agents like Frank Cortez avoided paying occupational taxes and return bonds because they only worked for a single employer, even though that corporation might provide thousands of workers to dozens of growers.96 Finally, in the words of Carey McWilliams, the “principal consequence of this law was to make of out-of-state recruitment a kind of illegal, underground conspiracy.”97 The law had the effect of making the already harrowing passage north even more dangerous for the workers themselves, as contractors now sought more than ever to hide their activities from state authorities. In the end, the law was “harassing, but it presents no insuperable barrier to sugar beet or other companies’ shipping thousand of laborers out of Texas,” according to Paul Taylor.98 The best indication of the ineffectiveness of the law came in 1940, however, when T.Y. Collins, an official of the Texas Bureau of Labor, announced that the state had yet to collect any occupational taxes from labor contractors.99

More importantly, however, the Emigrant Agency Law made clear the racial assumptions underlying Texas labor law. As David Montejano has argued, “The political situation for the Mexicans in Texas . . . appeared quite ominous. With 85% of the State’s migratory labor force composed of Mexicans, the thrust

96 McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 259-267.
97 McWilliams, North from Mexico, 167-168.
98 Taylor, “Dimmit County,” 332.
99 Valdes, Al Norte, 54.
of these labor laws was unequivocally clear; they were in essence a set of racial labor controls.″

The Emigrant Agency Law, despite its sieve-like enforcement capacity, was the logical conclusion of the political and agricultural developments of the 1910s and 1920s. It served as both a reflection of and integral element in the construction of the caste system of South Texas. The self-reinforcing collusion of farmer and politician placed the state firmly behind growers’ interests in every regard, and the wellbeing of both groups depended on the construction of a system that stripped political power from Mexicans and Mexican Americans as a means to immobilize and exploit them. The Emigrant Agency Law serves as the ultimate symbol of the dominance of farming interests in the political, social, and economic realms.

More importantly, it symbolized the political ascendance of a South Texas model of labor relations that combined a racially-segmented job market with a clear denial of the basic rights of choice and mobility for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While the rural South featured many of the same strictures – anti-enticement laws and racial job market segmentation most obviously – the constant flow of migrants from Mexico set South Texas apart. Not only could South Texas growers replenish their labor supplies almost at will, but they were able to erase the need for tenants and sharecroppers. Their workforce came from the migrant stream of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that stretched from northern Mexico to the US Midwest. Despite the shortcomings of the web of labor controls, its ability to immobilize workers seasonally even as new migrants continued to come

100 Montejano, Race, Labor Repression, and Capitalist Agriculture, 34-35.
from Mexico helped create a unique model of labor relations dependent on foreign workers and the denial of basic labor rights.

Anti-enticement laws, however, only dealt with interstate migration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. South Texas growers also feared losing their access to workers coming from Mexico. This threat proved to be much more complicated and forced the growers and politicians of Texas to side with their mortal enemies in the sugar beet industry as both groups took to the hustings to denounce immigration restriction.

“If things are good here in the United States we come to work, if they are better in Panama, or Colombia, or Peru, tomorrow or the next day we will go down there. We are here only for a short time. When things get well in Mexico we go there not only because the work is good but also because that is our home and final resting place.”
Anonymous Track Laborer

On New Year’s Eve, 1918, Harlingen land speculator F.Z. Bishop wrote a letter to Senator Morris Sheppard (D-TX), co-author of the 18th Amendment and national standard-bearer of the prohibitionists. Bishop had no liquor-related concerns, however. He wrote, instead, to demand the Senator’s help in securing labor from Mexico. “There is a greater demand than ever before for common Mexican labor in the Lower Rio Grande Valley,” he claimed. Mexicans represented “the only class of labor that can be secured to prepare raw land for cultivation.” Unfortunately, wrote Bishop, “it seems that the present restrictions governing Mexican immigration, instead of being removed altogether, as in our opinion they should be, are about to be made more severe.” The culprits were clear: “Organized labor in this country has used its influence to prevent common labor from moving freely into the border counties of Texas, although in those counties organized labor is not very strong, and further, it is commonly known that organized labor would not be affected to the slightest degree by unrestricted movement of Mexican farm labor into this country.” Bishop pleaded that the Senator eliminate all restrictions against Mexican entry into the United States because, “We, as well as others who are developing this country,

are facing a serious shortage of common farm labor, which is retarding the development of the resources of the Valley. 2

Bishop objected to federal efforts in the 1910s and 1920s to establish a comprehensive immigration code that began to systematize and limit who could and should enter the United States. These new laws replaced the patchwork immigration and border control regulations established during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Foran Act of 1886, and a series of additional laws in the early 1900s deemed Asians, foreign contract laborers, anarchists, prostitutes, the diseased, and anyone “likely to become a public charge” unfit for entry. 3 While these ad hoc laws did little to standardize US immigration regulation, they created a momentum for restrictionism that sought to maintain the logic of the Chinese Exclusion Act and to extend its spirit to other undesirables.

These new laws also necessitated the creation of an apparatus of regulation. In addition to the older processing centers such as Ellis Island and Angel Island on each coast, the Immigration Service also established a series of new border stations along the land borders with Mexico and Canada. The newly created Border Patrol guarded the border region beyond the actual ports of entry and augmented the enforcement capacity of the Immigration Service. Finally, the introduction of documents such as passports and visas verified citizenship and helped to further systematize and regularize the entry process.

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2 F.Z. Bishop to Senator Morris Sheppard, December 31, 1918, File 54261/202E, Box 273, Record Group 85, Immigration and Naturalization Service, United States National Archives, Washington, DC.

Meanwhile, agriculturalists across the nation continued to clamor for more laborers while this architecture of immigration restriction rose all around them. Their demands collided with the growth of militant nativism that focused on the specter of a flood of illiterate common laborers descending upon the United States.\(^4\) Between 1917 and the beginning of the Great Depression, when political nativism and the South Texas farm boom both reached their respective high-water marks, each side waged unrelenting battle to ensure that their conception of proper immigration controls would regulate who could and should enter the United States.

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The first step toward a new, systematic immigration code came with the Immigration Act of 1917. The law doubled the head tax for entry to eight dollars per person and added a literacy test (in their native language) for heads of household, while maintaining all of the older restrictions.\(^5\) Along the US-Mexico border, many applicants immediately withdrew their applications. Presumably, many of these simply entered as undocumented migrants across the largely unguarded southern border.\(^6\) Not surprisingly, the growers of South Texas, in the process of building their agricultural empires in 1917, angrily decried the legislation. Picking up their old refrain that they had an inherent right to Mexican labor, the growers fretted that the immigration restrictions would ruin them. The Department of Labor, the Immigration Service,

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\(^5\) Nativist forces had sought a literacy test for decades, but had failed to secure its passage a number of times since first attempting such a bill in 1897. Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land}, 162.

\(^6\) Mark Reisler, \textit{By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940} (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 24.
Congressmen, and Senators received an almost endless stream of letters and telegrams from farmers and others in Texas who demanded an end to immigration restrictions.\textsuperscript{7} A mine manager in Central Texas, for instance, wrote to Senator Charles Culberson of Texas that it was “the ‘hewers of wood and carriers of water’ class of Mexicans that we are after.” In other words, he and other employers wanted precisely the sort of immigrants the head tax and literacy test were meant to exclude. “Lots of these Mexicans are in Mexico today and want to return to Texas but can not,” he complained. “All labor in every line is very short, and scarce, high prices are being paid, and you cannot get the labor because the labor is just simply not there.”\textsuperscript{8} Similar urgent pleas for help came from all over Texas, as Chambers of Commerce, often rechristened as Councils of Defense, begged for more labor from Mexico.\textsuperscript{9}

This pressure quickly had its intended result. Eighteen days after the immigration act went into effect on May 5, the Secretary of Labor bowed to these insistent calls for increased immigration on May 23, 1917. He issued a departmental order that suspended the literacy test, head tax, and contract labor exclusion for Mexican agricultural workers due to “an emergent condition,

\textsuperscript{7} See File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA. It is worth noting that the vast majority of these entreaties came from Texas. Complaints came from other states as well, but not on the same scale.

\textsuperscript{8} E.S. Orgain to Charles Culberson, no date, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.

\textsuperscript{9} See File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA. The cynical nature of many of these calls can be seen in a letter written by T.C. Jennings, Commissioner of the Texas Bureau of Labor Statistics, to the Secretary of Labor, in which he argued that the labor shortages were exaggerated if not completely fabricated. As with those calling for the end of these regulations, however, Jennings seemed to have an ulterior motive. He argued that the “great danger of unrestricted Mexican immigration lies in the fact that, after the war is over and the millions who are now in France and who will be there before its close, will return home only to find themselves displaced by cheap alien labor.” Even in Texas, then, some officials took the same stance as Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor in trying to limit Mexican immigration at all costs. T.C. Jennings to Secretary of Labor, July 13, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
caused by the war." By July 1918 these exemptions to the immigration law also covered workers leaving Mexico for work on the railroads, in any mining enterprise, or construction work in any of the four border states, despite the concerns of the Director-General of the Immigration Service that the decision "to permit industries other than agricultural to avail themselves of such supply of common labor as can be obtained in Mexico (the even approximate amount of which is altogether problematical) is quite likely so to deplete the supply available to the agricultural interests as to interfere materially in the direct production of the foodstuffs." 

A few years later the Secretary of Labor gave further reason for these exemptions in a letter to Samuel Gompers. Explaining the necessity of his actions, he wrote:

You are aware of the strong pressure that has been brought to bear upon the Government to reverse its settled policy as regards Asiatic labor, and to let down the barriers raised by legislation, for the purpose of permitting the wholesale importation of such labor under the plea of war-time necessity. The Department is of the belief that the action taken by it to meet the real emergency that existed, through the utilization of the labor of Mexico, the Bahamas and Jamaica (as well as that of our own possession, Porto Rico), has been to a large extent the means of relieving the pressure mentioned. 

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10 Departmental Order, Secretary of Labor, June 12, 1918, File 52461/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA; Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 25-33; "Contract Labor Admitted for Farmers," Survey (June 30, 1917), 295-296.
11 Commissioner-General of Immigration Service to Secretary of Labor, June 11, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA; Departmental Order, Secretary of Labor, July 10, 1918, File 52461/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA. Smaller numbers of workers also came in from the Bahamas and Jamaica under these same exemptions.
12 Secretary of Labor to Samuel Gompers, December 20, 1918, File 54261/202E, Box 273, RG 85, USNA.
In other words, Secretary Wilson justified his decision as the lesser evil that would placate the agriculturalists without allowing the reintroduction of Chinese immigration, the old bogeyman of craft unionists.

Employers hoping to take advantage of these exceptions filed an application with either the Immigration Service or the United State Employment Service stating the number of workers needed, the “class of work,” wages offered, and place of employment. Upon acceptance of the application, the US Employment Service admitted the laborers from Mexico, photographed each of them for identification purposes, and turned them over to the employer. The Labor Department made it clear that these exemptions, and the workers admitted under them, were only temporary. As a means of ensuring that these immigrants did not remain in the United State permanently under these exemptions, the Department administered a hold-back scheme whereby employers withheld twenty-five cents for each day of employment up to a maximum of one hundred dollars, after which the employer withheld one dollar each month for the duration of the immigrant’s time in the United States. Employers then sent this money via postal money orders to the Inspector in Charge at the immigrant’s place of entry, who deposited the money in a postal savings bank in the name of the immigrant. The exempted laborer received these withheld wages from the bank when they left the country. Any worker who did not return to Mexico at the end of this employment forfeited these

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13 Departmental Order, Secretary of Labor, June 12, 1918, File 52461/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
14 Departmental Order, Secretary of Labor, June 12, 1918, File 52461/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA; Commissioner-General of Immigration Service to Secretary of Labor, June 11, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
earned wages. These hold-backs also allowed the Immigration Service to maintain approximate knowledge of the location of each contracted worker through the money orders.

During the first year of this program of exemptions, 9,401 Mexicans entered the United States to work, but farmers complained that this system still damaged their interests. They sought the removal of all restrictions on immigration from Mexico, complaining that the temporary admission system established by the Department of Labor was too time-consuming and bureaucratic. At the head of the forces seeking to compel the Department of Labor to drop all regulations was Herbert Hoover, then head of the United States Food Administration, who waged a persistent campaign to convince Woodrow Wilson and the Department of Labor to ignore the Immigration Act of 1917 when it came to the entry of Mexicans. In June 1918 he complained to FelixFrankfurter, then Assistant to the Secretary of Labor, “There are several restrictions in force which are handicapping the movement of Mexican labor north across the border.” He called for an end to the hold-back scheme, because it “is bad, as it is deducted from his wage and further, we do not want him to return.”

Expanding on this point, Hoover grumbled, “There also exists a clause providing that he must return in six months and, although this period is possible of extension, the restriction should be waived so that there is no limit

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15 Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 30; “Mexican Laborers Admitted under Order of Secretary of Labor, June 1, 1917 to March 1, 1918,” no date, File 54261/202A, Box 273, RG 85, USNA; E.P. Reynolds to Supervising Inspector, February 26, 1918, File 54261/202A, Box 273, RG 85, USNA; Inspector in Charge at Hidalgo, Texas, to Supervising Inspector, no date, File 54261/202A, Box 273, RG 85, USNA.

16 Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, June 4, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.

17 Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, June 4, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
on his stay in the states."¹⁸ The required photographs also aroused Hoover’s ire, as he claimed that Mexicans “have a primitive suspicion of the camera” causing many to abandon hopes to immigrate because of their fear of photography. Finally, he called for an end to the requirement that “farmers must meet and contract with the laborer at the border. We hope to overcome this by having special representatives make these contacts at Brownsville, Eagle Pass, Laredo, and El Paso.”¹⁹ In conclusion, Hoover declared, “We need every bit of this labor that we can get and we need it badly and... we will need it for years to come.”²⁰

One week later the Secretary of Labor replied to Hoover’s entreaty. Referring to Hoover’s complaint that the entry of Mexican workers should be permanent, Secretary Wilson reminded Hoover that “this Department is confronted with provisions of law which absolutely exclude from permanent entry to the United States a vast majority of the ordinary laborers that live in the Republic of Mexico.”²¹ He deflected the rest of Hoover’s objections in the same manner:

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¹⁸ Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, June 4, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA. Shortly after he wrote the letter, this provision was extended to the duration of the war.
¹⁹ Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, June 4, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA. A week before Hoover made this suggestion the Texas Food Administration and the Texas Council of Defense undertook exactly these steps, placing representatives at each of the four border towns mentioned by Hoover to act as agents for Texas farmers interested in importing contract workers from Mexico. While I cannot say definitively that Hoover knew about this or encouraged this, he did mention in his correspondence working with the Texas Food Administrator, so the proximity in time between the actions of the Texas government and Hoover’s letter was probably not a coincidence. J.W. Berkshire to Immigration Service Inspectors in Charge at El Paso, Eagle Pass, Laredo, and Brownsville, May 29, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
²⁰ Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, June 4, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
²¹ Secretary of Labor to Herbert Hoover, June 11, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
Most of these laborers are illiterate; the law does not permit an illiterate alien to enter permanently. In the nature of things they must come into the United States at the present time under contract or in pursuance of some kind of an agreement or arrangement to be placed at employment – they could not get here otherwise, for most of them are poverty stricken; and the law mandatorily excludes from permanent admission what is described therein as “a contract laborer”. The law assesses a head tax of $8.00 each on aliens entering this country for permanent residence; and many of these persons would not know where to turn to raise that amount. It is necessary also to adopt a certain not too cumbersome method of identification and of keeping account of their movements after admission – one that can be relied upon to locate the men after the need for their services no longer exists and enable the Department to put them back into Mexico if they do not return of their own volition.22

While he assured Hoover that his department would “do everything within its power and its authority under the law to further the production and conservation of foodstuffs,” Secretary Wilson closed his letter with a subtle rebuke to Hoover and his agricultural allies: “The Mexican border, it is the consensus of opinion of the Departments, is the weakest point in our line of defense so far as espionage, the carrying and securing of military information, and similar patterns are concerned.”23 In other words, even though he declared exemptions to the Immigration Act of 1917 within a few days of its enactment as a wartime emergency measure, he clearly agreed with the nativist contention that the government needed to throw up obstacles to impede permanent migration to the United States, even if he couched it in the all-too-familiar language of national defense and protection from subversion.

A chorus of other voices joined with Hoover, however, and increased the pressure on the Department of Labor and the Immigration Service to completely

22 Secretary of Labor to Herbert Hoover, June 11, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
23 Secretary of Labor to Herbert Hoover, June 11, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
ignore the Immigration Act of 1917. Many of these supplicants demurred that their calls for Mexican labor were “written with as much, or more patriotism, as it is for personal interests,” asking only that the government remove “an obstacle which hampers one of the greatest needs of our Country today.”

Telegrams from across Texas poured in, pleading “as a ‘win the war’ measure that all restrictions against Mexican labor be lifted except health regulations.”

More florid was the entreaty from the owner of the Landa Flour Mill in New Braunfels (30 miles north of San Antonio) who complained, “We would certainly be stultifying ourselves after heeding the instructions from the President and the Food Administration to cultivate every available inch of land, and being blessed with these splendid rains which will realize the dreams of this drought stricken country for large and abundant crops, if all of this should perish just at a time when most needed, simply through lack of physical help.”

The only responsible thing for the government to do, he wrote, was to end all immigration restrictions on Mexicans, “the only hope and main stay of this country as far as labor is concerned.” He declared that securing this labor was “one of the most important and vital war measures for the relief of this part of the country.”

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24 L.B. Leighton to William Hollis, July 10, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
25 The Chambers of Commerce across the state clearly had a form telegram they each sent in with a few variations according to the interests of the locality. Corsicana Chamber of Commerce to Commissioner-General of Immigration, July 25, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
26 Landa Flour Mills to Senator Charles Culberson, May 9, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
27 Landa Flour Mills to Senator Charles Culberson, May 9, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.
When World War I ended in November 1918, however, the reason for the Mexican exemptions disappeared.\textsuperscript{28} The next month, on December 15, 1918, Secretary Wilson ended the exemptions. Importations continued until January 15, 1919, while all agricultural workers already in the United States were permitted to stay until the end of the next growing season.\textsuperscript{29} Not surprisingly, the looming reinstitution of the head tax and literacy test prompted a storm of protest from agricultural interests around the nation. Sugar beet corporations screamed that they had expanded their operations during the war years at the "urgent request of the Food Administration," and they demanded that the Secretary of Labor continue the exemptions to reward them for their profit patriotism.\textsuperscript{30} Texas growers echoed the same sentiments. Despite these protests, however, the Department of Labor allowed the exemptions to lapse in early 1919. Thus, beginning in 1919, Mexicans and their prospective employers either had to abide by the letter of recent immigration law or ignore it and assume that enforcement would be lax.

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While the end of World War I led agriculturalists across the nation to plead for an end to the specific immigration regulations that they found

\textsuperscript{28} For final statistical breakdowns of workers imported through two ports of entry in Texas, see: "Mexican Laborers Imported Departmental Exceptions through the Port of Del Rio," January 13, 1919, File 54261/202, Box 272, RG 85, USNA; "Mexican Laborers Imported Departmental Exceptions through the Port of Hidalgo," January 13, 1919, File 54261/202, Box 272, RG 85, USNA. While these documents do not tell exactly when the workers came, they do break down the numbers by importer and number of deserters. For both ports of entry, official desertion rate was about 10%.

\textsuperscript{29} Reisler, \textit{By the Sweat of Their Brow}, 33; Commissioner-General of Immigration to all Commissioners and Inspectors of Bureau of Immigration, December 17, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 272, RG 85, USNA; Departmental Memo, Information and Education Service of the Department of Labor, December 26, 1918, File 54261/202E, Box 273, RG 85, USNA.

\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in Reisler, \textit{By the Sweat of Their Brow}, 33.
inconvenient, the aftermath of the war also witnessed a dramatic increase in aggressive nationalism that culminated in the passage of far more restrictive legislation in the 1920s that drastically expanded the ability of the federal government to exclude new immigrants. The momentum that allowed for the passage of the literacy test in the Immigration Act of 1917 only grew, as both political parties clamored to appease the interests of nativists eager to stop the increasing entries of immigrants they deemed degenerate and overly swarthy.

While Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere remained exempt from the most exclusionary elements of these new laws, the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 did have profound effects on Mexican immigration as they helped to cast movement across the southern border of the United States as the quintessential act of illegal migration.

The reasons for this upsurge in nativism, according to John Higham, “lay in the objective circumstance of 1920. That year, as part of a general adjustment to peacetime conditions, two factors which time and again in American history had encouraged anti-foreign outbreaks vividly reappeared. One was economic depression, the other a fresh wave of immigration.” 31 In addition, the aftermath of World War I created a worldwide trend toward exclusion that arose in reaction to the massive refugee populations created by the devastation of the war. 32 As historian Mae Ngai has argued, “the

31 Higham, Strangers in the Land, 266-267.
32 Mae Ngai expanded on this point, writing that “the rush after World War I to legislate restriction in Congress, while argued in the domestic political language of racial nativism, was a direct response to the specter of millions of destitute European war refugees seeking entry into the United States.” Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10. See also Saskia Sassen, Guests and Aliens (New York: New Press, 1999).
international system that emerged with World War I gave primacy to the
territorial integrity of the nation-state, which raised the borders between
nations,” with the consequence that issues of citizenship, always at the root of
any claim for inherent rights, became cemented more firmly and ineluctably to
the nation-state. 33 Stricter exclusionary immigration measures severely limited
the rights which any non-citizen could claim within any nation-state. For
Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States, whose rights and
citizenship had long been ignored, these trends did not portend a positive future.

As Congress and the nativists formulated the legislation to bring these
exclusionary ideals into reality, the tenuous nature of Mexican existence within
the United States was again illustrated as the economic downturn of 1920-1921
led to a deportation drive that sought to expel those immigrants who over Stayed
their exemptions as well as any others deemed “a menace to the peace of the
community.” 34 A few hundred thousand left the United States, many of their
own accord as unemployment sky-rocketed, but many others found themselves
involuntarily deported. 35 Especially vulnerable were Mexicans in places like
Chicago and Detroit as the Immigration Bureau launched a nationwide sweep of
urban areas in 1921, deporting any Mexicans who could not provide proof of
permanent residence in the United States. 36 Not only did this deportation

33 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 19.
34 Sarah Deutsch, No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic
Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987),
124.
36 Zaragoza Vargas, Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in
Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 83. One
effect of the 1920-1921 depression and the deportation campaign was a brief out-migration of
Mexicans from the Upper Midwest, but that trend ended by 1922 after the depression blew over.
campaign serve as a preview of the massive repatriation campaigns of the Great Depression, but it also served as proof for some that Mexican immigration was substantively different than from other nations because it could be reversed and pushed back south of the border just as easily as it had first begun. The belief that Mexicans were both economically necessary and easily discarded had much to do with the exclusion of Mexico from the immigration quotas in 1921, 1924, and after.

There were certainly individuals and groups who wanted Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere placed under quota restrictions, but they often found themselves on the defensive against powerful agribusiness interests who vigorously lobbied to limit the severity of proposed legislation. Sugar beet corporations, South Texas growers, and others dependent on the labor of Mexicans argued that quotas would not only decimate their workforce, but were entirely unnecessary in the context of Mexican immigration. On many counts, the restrictionists and anti-restrictionists shared the same beliefs in the racial degeneracy of Mexicans, but their conclusions as to its meaning differed. In the words of historian David Gutierrez, “Arguing in all seriousness that Mexicans had an ingrained homing instinct like that of migratory birds, western lobbyists repeatedly assured congressional committees that Mexican workers came to the United States seeking only to earn a stake before they ultimately returned to Mexico.”

John Nance Garner, congressman from South Texas, became one of

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The anti-restrictionist argument rested on the assumption that Mexicans were not really immigrants at all, but rather temporary sojourners who lacked the desire or the capacity to enter into US society. They ridiculed the restrictionist fears that Mexicans would degrade the nation’s racial stock, and instead argued that Mexicans represented the only foreign labor force that did not represent a social threat. George Clement of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce argued, “If we cannot get the Mexican to supply . . . casual labor, we have but one place to turn – the Porto Rican negro or as he is commonly known, ‘the Portuguese nigger.’” Appropriating the language of the nativists, Clements continued, “I do not think I need to stress the biological problem, particularly in California and the border states where so many of our people are dark skinned. [The Puerto Rican] is an American citizen, and once coming to us becomes a real social problem as well as adding to our American negro problem which is all ready sufficiently serious enough to have become a national question.” Finally, he asked rhetorically, “Is there any wonder we want to keep our
Mexican labor?" 39 Mexican immigration, according to Clements, kept the Southwest from repeating the racial problems of the Southeast by carefully seeking a workforce that supposedly left as suddenly as it appeared.

The anti-restrictionists sought a labor policy rather than an immigration policy with regards to Mexico. 40 Despite the rising tide of nativism, then, they shielded their own economic needs from the looming threat of quota restrictions by turning the nativists' arguments against them, depicting Mexicans as an inferior group, but one that would remain eternally peripheral to the social and economic life of the United States. While the argument was far from over in the early 1920s, for the time being Mexicans remained exempted from quota restrictions. Still, as Sarah Deutsch has argued, their legal status became that of the "permanently marginal laborer" whose continued tolerance by Anglos in the United States required endless work without any efforts at social improvement. 41 Were these Mexicans to test the limits of their marginality, the anti-restrictionists explained, rapid deportation would solve the problem. For proof they pointed to the deportation campaigns of 1920-1921.

As a result, the 1921 and 1924 laws did not specifically limit immigration from Mexico. Instead, lawmakers focused on Asia and the sources of the so-called "new immigration" in Europe. They devised quota systems that drastically reduced the number of admissible immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and outlawed further immigration from Asia (with the

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39 Gutierrez, Walls and Mirrors, 48-49.
41 Deutsch, No Separate Refuge, 126.
temporary exception of the Philippines, still a possession of the United States).\textsuperscript{42}

The literacy test remained in place and the head tax and visa fee increased to eighteen dollars, so the obstacles constructed across the US-Mexico border by the Immigration Act of 1917 only grew with the 1921 and 1924 laws. Thus, while Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere avoided the nativists' numerical wrath in the early 1920s, these laws exacerbated the issue of illegal immigration along the nation's southern boundary introduced by the Immigration Act of 1917.

The 1924 law proved especially important in encouraging unauthorized entry, racializing the image of the illegal alien, and fashioning the law enforcement reaction to these supposed threats to national sovereignty. As Manuel Gamio stated in his landmark study of Mexican immigration to the United States,

\begin{quote}
The main and immediate reasons for illegal entrance of Mexicans into the United States, as we could observe personally, and from the interviewing of a great many Mexican immigrants as well as smugglers, contractors, employers, etc., are as follows: 1. Difficulties presented by the immigration laws, of which, as a rule, the Mexican immigrants are completely ignorant, and which, among other requirements, stipulate literacy, a condition which many immigrants cannot fulfill. 2. Loss of time and expense entailed while waiting on the Mexican side during the unwinding of the long and complicated red tape. 3. The sum paid to the smuggler is generally smaller than the eighteen dollars needed to cover the consular visa and the head tax. 4. Individuals whose labor has been previously contracted for in Mexico cannot legally enter the United States, so they enter illegally.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} An exhaustive analysis of both quota laws is beyond the scope of this study. For in-depth analyses of these laws, see Ngai, \textit{Impossible Subjects}, 1-93; Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land}, 265-330.

Unlike earlier immigrants from Mexico, these new arrivals found themselves confronted with a new set of obstacles to entry that were often easier avoided than overcome. As demand for laborers in agriculture and industry grew in the 1920s, the number of illegal entries from Mexico increased apace. “The immigration laws during the 1920s did not assign numerical quotas to Mexicans,” Mae Ngai has argued, “but the enforcement provisions of restriction – notably visa requirements and border-control policies – profoundly affected Mexicans, making them the single largest group of illegal aliens by the late 1920s.” The vagaries of immigration legislation, then, made the Mexican immigrant the “prototypical illegal alien.”

Within these formulations of illegal entry, the newly formed Border Patrol emerged as the symbolic protectors of the nation from a lawless border region. Many of the early Border Patrolmen were recruited from the Texas Rangers, and carried many of the same attitudes about Mexicans that motivated the Rangers during their decades of trouble-making along the border, earning the new Border Patrol the hated epithet “rinche” in the folklore and oral tradition of the border region. A Border Patrol Supervisor reported that it “took considerable indoctrinating to convince some of the inspectors they were not chasing outlaws, and we never did get it out of the heads of all of them, for we had to discharge several for being too rough.” They acted as both the

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41 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 7.
enforcement mechanism for these laws and the looming specter of violence and deportation that hovered over illegal entrants as they crossed the border, sought employment, and attempted to bargain for the improvement of any aspect of their employment or living conditions.

As a result, according to Mae Ngai, "as numerical restriction assumed primacy in immigration policy, its enforcement aspects – inspection procedures, deportation, the Border Patrol, criminal prosecution, and irregular categories of immigration – created many thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants."48 The increase in deportations to Mexico during the 1920s created by these changing laws became proof for many that Mexicans were the most flagrant and potentially dangerous violators of the law. The unintended consequences of these laws and their effects on population movements across the US-Mexico border created the image of a typical unauthorized alien that shrouded the Mexican and Mexican American populations with the taint of illegality and illegitimacy. Thus, as Mae Ngai argued, "walking (or wading) across the border emerged as the quintessential act of illegal immigration, the outermost point in a relativist ordering of illegal immigration."49

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The Immigration Act of 1924 was far from the end of the fight over quota restrictions, however. Nativists realized that their system still excluded the Western Hemisphere from the quota system. They worked tirelessly

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48 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 71.
49 Ibid., 89.
throughout the remainder of the 1920s to complete their regime of restriction.\textsuperscript{50}

The same basic outlines of the debates over the original quota laws continued during the second half of the 1920s. Restrictionists increased their attack on the racial suitability of Mexicans, while anti-restrictionists pleaded economic necessity as they also continued their argument that Mexicans possessed an inherent homing instinct that made their eventual expulsion possible. Now that immigration policy for Europe and Asia had been decided, however, the intensity of the argument only grew as one side sought to patch the largest hole in the quota laws, while the other fought to maintain the labor source they deemed necessary for continued growth and low wages.

The leader of the restrictionist forces in Congress, and therefore the nemesis of southwestern growers, was Congressman John Box of East Texas.\textsuperscript{51} Restricting immigration from the Western Hemisphere, especially Mexico, obsessed Box during his twelve year tenure in the House of Representatives from 1919-1931. From his seat on the Immigration and Naturalization Committee, Box tried to secure the passage of a bill that would extend the quota to the entire Western Hemisphere, first submitting a bill to the committee shortly after the passage of the 1924 quota law. In 1926, at the urging of Box, the committee held hearings on the matter, and both sides of the quota debate arrived in Washington ready for battle.

\textsuperscript{50} Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land}, 325.

\textsuperscript{51} Box’s district was an old cotton-raising region struggling to compete with the cotton growers of South Texas and their Mexican workforce, so restrictionist sentiment was much higher in that region than elsewhere in the state.
The growers came to the hearings claiming to have already suffered labor shortages due to the effects of the 1924 law. They declared that any further tightening of the regulations would ruin the nation’s agricultural economy. The majority of their arguments rested on the same basis as they had a few years earlier. As a *Los Angeles Times* writer described, “Mexican labor ebbs and flows over the border as it is needed here,” bringing with it a “minimum of social complexities.” But during the 1926 hearings the anti-restrictionists, made up primarily of southwestern agribusiness and Midwestern sugar beet corporations, attempted to assuage some of the restrictionists’ fears by calling for the creation of a guest worker program that would only admit Mexican workers on a temporary basis. While they had complained incessantly throughout the World War I exemption program, growers clearly feared that the growth in political nativism threatened immigration from Mexico. They pointed to the temporary migration programs established by the racial-purity-obsessed Germans as a potential model, under which thousands of migrants from Poland and Lithuania came to work in the sugar beet fields.

Congressman Box and the rest of the restrictionist forces, however, rejected both the usefulness and legality of such a guest worker program. In addition to the fact that Box did not think that these temporary migrations would be as benign as their supporters claimed, he also believed that guest worker programs violated the spirit of free labor, creating a system no different from peonage. Thus, the Congressman vehemently rejected the logic of the anti-

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52 Timothy Turner, quoted in Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 83.
53 Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 200-203; Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor,” 74-75.
restrictionists’ proposal. If the system operated as it should, it would have created a system that Box deemed unconstitutional, and if temporary entry became permanent settlement then all of the restrictionists’ efforts would have come to naught. 54

Countering these arguments based on economic necessity, the restrictionists focused on the racial status of Mexicans. In a study partially funded by the Department of Labor and published by the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee, Princeton University Economist Robert Foerster laid out the case for exclusion on eugenic grounds. He described Mexicans as “men of few wants, apathetic, without ambition, not concerned with the future.” 55 Further, “no effective democracy resting on universal suffrage can come quickly in a country whose population is still so retrograde as the Mexican in the essential prerequisites of democracy.” 56 The core of Foerster’s contention, however, lay in his belief that “our control over the future race stock of the United States will apparently never be greater than it is today,” and only through careful legislative action could the nation avoid the potential damage done by continued immigration from Latin America. 57 He complained that the 1924 immigration law gave preference “emphatically to immigration from the brown and black stocks.” 58 Further, he continued, “If hereafter every immigrant from countries and islands lying to the south of the United States were to be

54 Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 204.
56 Ibid., 14.
57 Ibid., 57.
58 Ibid., 60.
replaced by an immigrant from approved parts of Europe, nothing but gain would result for the United States.” 59 If these estimations of the capacity of Mexican immigrants were incorrect, Foerster stated that if “Latin American stocks have a race value for our civilization substantially above what has been indicated in this report and that mixture of our stocks with those other stocks, contrary to the present stage of knowledge, should result in good, there would still be ample time and opportunity to admit those stocks.” 60 Until such usefulness and capacity could be proven, however, Foerster called unequivocally for the restriction of immigration from Mexico and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean.

While these restrictionist arguments certainly enjoyed a wide audience, the pressure from growers’ interests remained too strong for Box’s bill to make it out of committee. Chairman Albert Johnson shared Box’s qualms about a guest work program, which he believed was “a sort of peonage system,” but also believed that some sort of seasonal admissions system had to accompany any quota arrangement for the Western Hemisphere. 61 Caught in the middle of these conflicting interests and proposals, the Box bill quietly died in 1926, but not without drawing more attention to the issue and making John Box the poster-boy for Mexican immigration restriction.

59 Ibid., 60.
60 Ibid., 59.
61 Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 204.
Over the next two years mail flooded into Box’s office. Some of these writers opposed the restriction efforts, such as the president of the Navasota Cooperage Company (in East Texas, north of Houston) who wrote that “you are very badly in error and evidently are being urged by labor Unions and those that have not the interest of the farmers and industries at heart. . . . The people in general, especially the farming class which constitutes a large majority of the voters have their eyes on their congressmen and Senators more than ever before and when election time comes around they are going to be remembered. And it will be well for you and your colleagues to look after the interests of Texans instead of so many lobbyists.” Florence Griswold of the Pan-American Round Table of San Antonio also scolded Box, writing, “We feel that the Congressmen of Texas should appreciate the Mexican laborer has always been an asset and has never proved a menace, and this cannot be said always of the Europeans.” These letters opposing restriction efforts were a tiny minority of the mail received by Box, however.

The vast majority of these letters supported Box’s efforts, though the reasons for supporting restriction varied widely. Some echoed the arguments made by Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor. W.F. Cottingham, the business manager of the Kleberg and Nueces County District

62 In a letter to Oliver Douglas Weeks, who transcribed all of the letters received by Box, the Congressman wrote, “I have been glad to hear from the humble and the illiterate, and many such have written.” John Box to Oliver Douglas Weeks, February 12, 1929, Box 2 Folder 1, Oliver Douglas Weeks Papers, League of United Latin American Citizens Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas-Austin.
63 J.H. Powell to John Box, January 29, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.
64 Florence Griswold to John Box, February 2, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson. The Pan-American Round Table was a group of society women in San Antonio. It was founded during the Mexican Revolution to aid political refugees. See Pan American Round Table of San Antonio Collection, University of Texas-San Antonio Archives.
Council of Carpenters and Joiners of America, wrote that "a great majority of Mexican Aliens that are allowed to come into Texas to work on the farm soon find their way into cities and towns where they can get shorter hours and better wages and soon forget there is a farm in Texas." He also claimed that urban business interests were the real culprits, not agriculturalists, because they sought more Mexican immigrants as a way to rid themselves of unions and "maintain themselves as overlords of this vast domain." Similarly, William Black of the Single Tax League of Texas wrote that continued immigration from Mexico would only complicate the already difficult land situation in the state, leading to further consolidation of landholding and a concomitant increase in wage labor and sharecropping.

Many more writers supported Box's efforts for racial reasons. Morrison Swift, radical turned eugenicist, enthusiastically supported the Box bill. "If every alien were shut out the American population would naturally increase to supply the labor demand," he wrote. "Manual labor would become as worthy and dignified as teaching, clerking, and banking, and the impossible problem of assimilating furnace-baked fossil foreigners who cannot be changed would disappear. Thereafter we should breed brains in strong physiques instead of brainlessness in bulk." C.M. Goethe, ardent eugenicist and president of the California-based Immigration Study Commission, claimed that the "high power

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65 W.F. Cottingham to John Box, February 1, 1928, Box 2, Folder 8, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.
66 W.F. Cottingham to John Box, February 4, 1928, Box 2, Folder 9, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.
67 William A. Black to John Box, May 31, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.
Mexican white” did not immigrate to the United States. Immigrants came only from what he termed “low Amerind stocks,” and they represented a drastic threat to the United States because “Mexican Amerind fecundity under American sanitation would speed the exhaustion of our food supply.”

Along the same lines, a man from Houston, who claimed to have lived in Mexico for many years, wrote, “I would think that a safe estimate would be that at least 95% have blood diseases.”

The remainder of the letters simply listed varied, often bizarre, complaints against Mexicans. A San Antonio man complained that “this city is . . . lousy with them in cotton time.” An Eagle Pass man claimed that Mexicans “do not stop at the border but go to every state in the Union.”

A writer from El Paso declared, “California objected to the Chinese years ago for no different reasons than is up now as regards the Mexican, yet a law was passed barring them out, and they are still barred out and rightly, yet an American born China-Boy for instance is as true an American as one could find and he wants to be all of that and more.” In what seems to have been an attempted joke, a San Antonio man sneeringly wrote, “The only redeeming feature the Mex. has they want [to] rape our white women.” Finally, a Corpus Christi man wrote ominously, “Every one of them in the US should be deported  

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69 C.M. Goethe to John Box, February 4, 1928, Box 2, Folder 11, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
70 C.M. Goethe to John Box, February 4, 1928, Box 2, Folder 11, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
71 S.D. Matthews to John Box, January 21, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
72 T.J. Hawkes to John Box, March 17, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
73 J.E. Fuquay to John Box, May 25, 1926, Box 2, Folder 3, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
74 John Lennon to John Box, January 14, 1926, Box 2, Folder 4, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.  
75 C.M. Click to John Box, March 1, 1928, Box 2, Folder 9, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.
... All this would be easier than a Civil War to work out the survival of the fittest. It will come as surely as your name is Box."\textsuperscript{76}

The same avalanche of letters arrived at the offices of Chairman Albert Johnson and the other congressmen on the Immigration and Naturalization Committee as pressure continued to build to apply quota restrictions to Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere. As a result, in 1928 the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee and the Senate Immigration Committee held a new series of hearings on the Box bill and its Senate counterpart, introduced by William Harris of Georgia. These bills called for the quotas enacted in 1924 to apply to the entire Western Hemisphere. Under that formula, which calculated annual limits as two percent of the foreign-born population in the United States in 1890, Mexico would have received 1,500 quota slots.\textsuperscript{77} As in 1926, both sides came to Washington ready for a fight.

The arguments remained roughly the same, with the restrictionists relying on eugenics while the anti-restrictionists claimed economic necessity to ward off quota restrictions. The restrictionist efforts appeared to be gaining momentum, with the Department of Labor firmly supporting their position under the leadership of Secretary James Davis, once described by the journal \textit{Eugenics} as "an exponent of restriction along scientific lines."\textsuperscript{78} On the other side, the Departments of Agriculture and Interior supported the anti-restrictionists. George C. Kreutzer, the director of reclamation economics in the Department of the Interior, testified that his department had invested $38

\textsuperscript{76} W.C. McDonald to John Box, April 9, 1928, Box 2, Folder 23, Weeks Papers, UT-Benson.

\textsuperscript{77} Reisler, \textit{By the Sweat of Their Brow}, 207.

\textsuperscript{78} Quoted in Ibid., 206.
million in irrigation projects in regions dependent on Mexican labor. He warned the restrictionists that the "return of the government's investment in these projects and the prosperity of related industries are dependent on favorable economic conditions continuing."\textsuperscript{79}

The most powerful and influential assistance for the anti-restrictionists, however, came from the Department of State. Secretary Frank Kellogg complained, "This Government has questions of a most important and acute nature pending with Mexico and certain other countries of Latin America."\textsuperscript{80} He argued that immigration restriction unnecessarily jeopardized these negotiations and threatened to derail a number of international agreements. In an appearance before the Senate Immigration Committee he explained that Mexico was the only Western Hemisphere nation that presented immigration problems, and those were overstated by restrictionists. He contended that Mexicans only came to the United States seasonally, then returned to Mexico, echoing the homing-pigeon analogy long used by anti-restrictionists.\textsuperscript{81}

On the strength of Kellogg's testimony and the considerable remaining clout of agricultural interests, the quota bills again died in committee. In response to the nativists, however, the State Department quickly acted to tighten visa controls to limit legal migration from Mexico through administrative means.\textsuperscript{82} Beginning in April 1928, Kellogg ordered consuls in Mexico "to

\textsuperscript{79} Quoted in Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{80} Quoted in Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} As discussed in Chapter 7, this tightening of visa controls happened at roughly the same time as the beginning of deportation drives in South Texas. They were two sides of the same effort to restrict immigration from Mexico that only increased once the Great Depression began.
exercise greater care in issuing immigration visas and to refuse visas to all applicants not entitled to them under the law." 83 These administrative changes resulted in a sharp decline in visas, and therefore in legal entries from Mexico. Similar to the 1924 law, this action did not restrict the number of Mexicans who could enter the United States, but it did complicate legal entry and drove many more to avoid the bureaucratic hoops altogether and simply enter without legal sanction. As historian Mark Reisler argued, "In instituting such a policy, the Hoover administration not only terminated the political controversy over Mexican immigration but also undertook a novel form of administrative immigration restriction that was to become a standard policy applicable to all nations throughout the depression." 84

Similar to the problems with census enumeration, these immigration laws and regulations (both proposed and actual) exhibited a confused (if not nonexistent) understanding of the difference between Mexican as a nationality and Mexican as a race/ethnicity. These laws relied on the notion that Mexican identity existed within a vacuum, remaining essentially unchanged by migration into the United States. Any difference between notions of citizenship and ethnicity/race disappeared, replaced by the static notion that, similar to the justifications used for the continued exclusion of Chinese immigrants, Mexicans remained inexorably alien to American civilization. They remained a population tied to the land as "hewers of wood and carriers of water." Despite the differences in opinion between the restrictionists and anti-restrictionists,

83 Quoted in Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 213-214; Corwin, "Story of Ad Hoc Exemptions," 146.
84 Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 218.
however, they shared this simplistic characterization of a fixed identity which individual Mexicans could not overcome, regardless of their citizenship. 85

While this idea fit quite nicely into the arguments put forward by agriculturalists that Mexicans existed as little more than beasts of burden that could be pushed south of the border at will, it also gave restrictionists one other method to exclude Mexicans from entry into the United States. As their legislative efforts failed, some looked to the courts to accomplish their goals. Their hopes rested on an effort to have an 1897 Circuit Court decision overturned. In 1896, Ricardo Rodriguez, an illiterate immigrant who had been in the United States for more than a decade, filed an application for naturalization before a federal judge in San Antonio. Two local lawyers challenged Rodriguez's right to citizenship, arguing that all Mexicans were ineligible because they fell between the qualifications for citizenship, which mentioned only Anglos and Africans. Their argument rested on the idea that, in addition to the fact that Mexicans were not mentioned in naturalization law, Mexicans were Indians and Indians remained ineligible for citizenship. 86 The lawyers' goal was to disqualify Mexicans from voting, but their challenge also raised the specter of overturning the naturalization and citizenship rights of all Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

85 See Mapes, "A Special Class of Labor," 76.
86 They also argued that the Texas Revolution had as its goal the removal of Mexicans "incapable of self-government." Quoted in Arnoldo de León, In Re Ricardo Rodriguez: An Attempt at Chicano Disenfranchisement in San Antonio, 1896-1897 (San Antonio: Caravel Press, 1979), 9.
A year later, the judge rendered his verdict in *In re Ricardo Rodriguez*.\(^{87}\) Drawing on the Fourteenth Amendment, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and case law, the judge rejected the notion that Rodriguez, and all other Mexicans, did not qualify for citizenship. Treaty obligations, then, staved off the loss of citizenship, but this logic also cemented the notion of a static Mexican identity into case law. The judge closed by lamenting Rodriguez’s lack of education or knowledge of the US political system, but stated, “Congress has not seen fit to require of applicants for naturalization an educational qualification, and courts should be careful to avoid judicial legislation. In the judgment of the court, the applicant possesses the requisite qualifications for citizenship, and his application will therefore be granted.”\(^{88}\)

For restrictionists, however, *In re Rodriguez* remained a focus for future activity, especially as their legislative efforts soured under pressure from growers and the State Department. They hoped to initiate a new test case that would overturn the precedent of the 1897 decision.\(^{89}\) Despite efforts to goad the Department of Labor into launching this test case, however, the restrictionist effort failed on the judicial front during the 1920s, in theory protecting the right of naturalization for Mexicans. Shortly after the restrictionist efforts met their final defeats in the late 1920s, however, the Great Depression hit and led to deportation drives and administrative changes that achieved many of the goals of the restrictionists by barring the entry of many while also making the legal

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\(^{87}\) *In re Rodriguez*, 81 Fed. 337.


\(^{89}\) Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 136.
and social status of Mexicans and Mexican Americans within the United States even more precarious than before.\footnote{See Rosales, \textit{Pobre Raza}, 127-128.}

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The post-revolutionary Mexican government, while trying to consolidate its own control throughout the tumultuous years of the Carranza, Obregón, and Calles presidencies, also kept a close eye on increasing emigration to the United States. While politicians in Mexico City declared that emigration threatened to destroy the revolution, they also sought to use the returned emigrants as potential modernizers who would bring back the knowledge of modern, industrial production to the towns and villages of Mexico. In addition to these sometimes contradictory goals, the Mexican government also focused on protecting the rights of Mexicans within the United States through the consular service.\footnote{For a dissenting view that claims that the consuls did nothing more than seek to exploit the emigrants, see Gilbert G. Gonzalez, \textit{Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).} While this system of emigration "controls" collapsed under the weight of the Great Depression, during the 1920s it not only helped blunt some of the worst treatment afforded Mexicans in the United States, but it also served as an interesting test case of the adaptability of the postrevolutionary Mexican government in responding to the growing emigration waves created by conditions on both sides of the border.

The nationalistic nature of the postrevolutionary governments almost required them to denounce emigration as antithetical to national success, and throughout the 1920s presidents and others condemned outward migration,
especially when it led to permanent settlement in the United States. Speaking
before the Mexican Congress in 1925, President Calles declared that emigration
was “a bane to the republic.”\footnote{Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy,” 220.} Emigrant Mexicans “were wickedly exploited
and incapable of protecting themselves,” having left the turmoil of revolutionary
Mexico for what Calles described as an even worse fate.\footnote{Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy,” 220.} Thus, he called on
the nation to encourage emigrants to return and to discourage future
emigrations. Similarly, the Mexico City newspaper, \textit{El Pueblo}, published a
circular sent by the Secretaría de Gobernación to the Governors of several states
warning, “It may well be that in this importation of Mexicans the only object is
to flood the State with laborers so that the various industries can reduce wages
on the ground that there is an abundance of labor, because they have for some
time been trying to make such a reduction.”\footnote{\textit{El Pueblo}, April 15, 1918, File 54261/202, Box 271, RG 85, USNA.}

Still, the federal government clearly realized that attempts to stop
emigration would be futile, as the continuing turmoil in Mexico and economic
growth in the US created a motivation for migration too powerful to legislate
away. The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores evinced this realization in the
early days of the Carranza government in 1917, admitting, “Since it is not
possible for the government to prevent emigration, it must take every measure
to reduce the hardships of our fellow citizens while they reside abroad.”\footnote{Quoted in Arthur F. Corwin, “Mexican Policy and Ambivalence toward Labor Emigration to
the United States,” in Corwin, \textit{Immigrants— and Immigrants}, 187.} At
the same time that Calles stood in front of the Congress and described
emigration to the United States as a blight on Mexico, he also established
migration offices in Torreón and Saltillo, cities through which most emigrants departing from central Mexico passed, to serve as informational resources on US immigration law and how to contact consuls in case of trouble. The government restricted northbound railroad traffic to points other than Torreón and Saltillo, hoping to assure that as many emigrants as possible received the information.96

Unable to stop the outward flow, the government worked to empower consuls within the United States to protect emigrants from exploitation and discrimination. These efforts involved a number of different tasks for the consular service. One example of consular activity was the co-signing of contracts by the Consul General in San Antonio for Mexicans sent to work for Bethlehem Steel. More often, they sent notices to local, state and federal officials, reporting instances of racially-motivated discrimination against Mexican citizens and Mexican Americans.97

One of the best examples of these efforts to protect Mexican emigrants in the United States occurred during the economic recession and repatriation drives of the early 1920s. While the US Immigration Service, aided by local and state efforts, rounded up thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who lacked proof of permanent residence, President Obregón and the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores established a repatriation department to coordinate voluntary returns, promising “free return transportation to the Mexican interior

97 For a thorough examination of consular activities within the US, see Rosales, Pobre Raza.
and subsistence. During the life of the program from 1921-1923 more than 150,000 emigrants returned to Mexico. To help attract these emigrants back to Mexico, the government also established a series of small agricultural colonies in northern Mexico as a tentative step toward more thorough agrarian reform. While these colonies were not as large or numerous as they would become when the Mexican government revived the idea during the Great Depression as a complementary element of the massive agrarian reform efforts of the Cárdenas presidency, these colonization activities in the early 1920s represented an important effort to aid emigrants.

In addition to protecting emigrants while in the United States, the Mexican government also sought to use this large presence abroad as a way to further modernization within Mexico. Describing these years of the post-revolutionary consolidation, Alan Knight argued that the Mexican government sought a radical restructuring of society:

Like their later Cuban counterparts, the Mexican revolutionaries set out to create a new man (and, with rather less emphasis, a new woman), who, imbued with a new morality, would be sober, industrious, literate, and patriotic. However, while Guevara's new man was supposed to reject material in favor of moral incentives, the Mexican new man was to be a creature of the market, individualist in manner, eager for gain, and ready for productive work under capitalist auspices. That, at any rate, was the prevailing notion of the 1920s; by the mid-1930s, when the magic of the market had lost some of its luster, the emphasis had shifted, and the "socialist" education of those years approximated even more closely the collectivist model of 1960s Cuba. Either way, however, the

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98 Quoted in Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 72.
100 Gamio, Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant, 147.
aim was to impose a superior morality on a wayward people, to extirpate endemic vices, to inculcate new virtues.\textsuperscript{101}

The emigrants formed an essential aspect of this national project to create a “new man” after returning from the belly of the modern capitalist beast.

The Mexican government and much of the new revolutionary elite hoped that time north of the border would inculcate in the Mexican people, especially the villagers and campesinos that represented the vast majority of the population, a new willingness to accept the work ethic and new methods of the US industrial economy. According to anthropologist Manuel Gamio, one of the most important proponents of this idea of constructive emigration, “Although the immigrant often undergoes suffering and injustice and meets many difficulties, he undoubtedly benefits economically by the change. He learns the discipline of modern labor. He specializes. He becomes familiar with industrial and agriculture machinery. He learns about scientific intensive agriculture. . . . He becomes a laborer of the modern type, much more efficient than before.”\textsuperscript{102}

As George Sanchez has argued, Gamio and others believed that “the provincialism exhibited by villagers in Mexico had given way to national rather than regional pride. In the United States, workers learned new skills and a work discipline that Mexican leaders believed was desperately needed for Mexico’s own development. Mexican nationals who had experienced life in the United States were believed to be potentially more productive and refined than the


\textsuperscript{102} Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the United States, 49.
typical mestizo villager.”\textsuperscript{103} These ideals rested on the ill-defined ideology of \textit{indigenismo}, described by George Sanchez as “a construct thoroughly the product of non-Indians, which sought to exalt the native Indian of Mexico while destroying his culture and land base.”\textsuperscript{104} For Gamio, the solution was to incorporate certain aspects of the indigenous tradition of Mexico into the postrevolutionary state, while sending many of the indigenous and mestizo north to strip them of their traditional modes of life and thought.

These efforts required a delicate balancing act on the part of the Mexican government. While they quietly wanted emigrants to venture north, they believed that permanent migration represented a complete loss to the nation. As a result, the government campaigned and propagandized furiously throughout the 1920s to encourage the emigrants to return home for the good of the nation and the revolution. Gamio argued that “permanent immigration is harmful to both countries, especially if it takes place on a large scale; and even if it does carry with it temporary economic benefits, in the long run it can cause great harm. For the United States this might be expected to make itself felt in labor struggles and perhaps in racial conflicts, whereas for Mexico it would mean the loss of its best working population, for it is exactly these that emigrate.”\textsuperscript{105} Thus, only when the emigrant returned to Mexico could the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\textsuperscript{103} Sanchez, \textit{Becoming Mexican American}, 119. \\
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{105} Gamio, \textit{Mexican Immigration to the United States}, 50.
\end{tabular}
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changes that occurred in the United States be put to the use of the postrevolutionary state.\textsuperscript{106}

As a result, the Mexican government continued offering to repatriate Mexicans in the United States even after the recession of the early 1920s ended. Even José Vasconcelos, the Mexican scholar forced into exile during the Calles years, urged emigrants to eventually return home in a 1928 speech in Chicago: “We are but the children of Israel who are passing our way through Egypt here in the United States doing the onerous labors, swallowing our pride, bracing up under the indignities heaped upon us here. If we expect to return and escape all this, as all good Mexicans ought to, then we should show interest in the affairs of our country from this Egypt of ours.”\textsuperscript{107} In this context, repatriation became, in the words of Arthur Corwin, “one of the most sacred obligations of defensive nationalism.”\textsuperscript{108}

One further complicating factor in this ideal of temporary emigration was the ongoing attempt to restrict Mexican immigration within the United States, which was followed closely by Mexicans emigrants and government officials. While the Mexican government encouraged measures like the Immigration Act of 1917 because they regularized immigration and continued to outlaw contract labor migration that the Mexican state had long abhorred, Mexico City reacted strongly to the threat of quota exclusions. While some of

\textsuperscript{106} Gamio recognized that the return to Mexico was only one step in the process. He wrote that “when immigrants return, as a rule, they go back singly or in very small groups, and are therefore soon absorbed back into the old conditions, becoming identified with the small town or rural backward culture which they left.” Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the United States, 49-50.

\textsuperscript{107} Quoted in Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, 115.

\textsuperscript{108} Corwin, “Mexican Policy and Ambivalence toward Labor Emigration to the United States,” 192.
these reactions probably arose from feelings that the United States was
denigrating Mexico and the Mexican people by trying to reduce their numbers
crossing the border, there was also a fear that Mexico would lose the use of the
United States as a laboratory of economic and social modernization. During the
Congressional debates in Washington over whether to apply quotas to the
Western Hemisphere, President Obregón announced that his government would
drastically reduce entries from the United States if Mexico was placed under a
quota.\textsuperscript{109} While this probably had very little effect on the immigration laws of
1921 and 1924, pressure from the Mexican government and the US State
Department clearly did have an effect on the Box bill and the numerous other
efforts to legislate a quota for Mexico after 1924.

Throughout the 1920s, then, as the United States moved to construct a
labor policy masquerading as an immigration policy for the Mexican border, the
Mexican government sought to maintain a delicate balance. They officially
discouraged emigration at the same time that they sought to use returned
emigrants as the building blocks of the new postrevolutionary nation, while also
trying to ameliorate the most extreme cases of discrimination and exploitation
against Mexicans in the United States through the efforts of the consular
service. These carefully laid plans collapsed on both sides of the border with
the onset of the Great Depression, but not before the basic course of
immigration/emigration policy for both nations had been established. For
decades, each nation drew upon the confused, sometimes contradictory, actions

and ideas of the 1920s to construct the regulations governing who could and
could not cross the border separating the United States and Mexico. Rather than
a departure from the past, then, the Great Depression repatriations, the Bracero
Program, and the Border Industrialization Program, to name a few examples,
were extensions of the binational governmental activism of the 1920s that
sought to control issues of entry and labor within a growing, increasingly
institutionalized, migration stream.

* * *

The economic growth in South Texas fueled a series of battles over the
place of Mexican and Mexican American workers in US society. The efforts to
seasonally immobilize Mexican migrant laborers, anti-enticement measures, and
immigration restriction debates were all aspects of this debate over the place of
the Mexican worker within a regional and national context. Looked at together,
each of these aspects of the agricultural growth of the 1920s represented unique
but intimately related elements of a system built on the backs of Mexicans and
Mexican Americans. Further, each of these efforts focused essentially on the
issues of the possibility and desirability of Chicano rights and citizenship,
though always through the lens of economic calculation justified by the idea
that Mexicans remained in the United States as the “hewers of wood and
carriers of water.” By the end of the 1920s, in spite of the efforts by the
Mexican government to mitigate some of the worst treatment suffered by
Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States, these changes helped
create a distinctly separate-but-unequal social sphere for Chicanos within South
Texas and the rest of the United States. The Border Patrol and calls for immigration restriction augmented the already formidable power wielded by farmers and politicians in maintaining a de facto system of segregation and labor market segmentation that created a distinct caste system that endured for decades to come.

Some relief would eventually come, but not during the Great Depression, to which I turn next.
Chapter 6: "Pest Hole of Low Paid Labor": The Politics of Depression in South Texas

"[W]e fail to see why the welfare of unskilled Mexican field labor should be promoted at the expense of American growers and tax-payers."

W.R. Gwathmey, Secretary, Texas Citrus League

In May 1938 Manuel Juárez left San Antonio’s largest and lowest paid industry. He abandoned his seasonal job as a pecan sheller on the West Side of San Antonio to travel to the cotton fields near Corpus Christi after hearing rumors that the coming harvest would be a substantial one. A widower, he packed his six children into his 1926 Ford Model T and arrived in Nueces County along with thousands of other Mexican families who had heard the same claims of plentiful work. Juárez and his family were sorely disappointed when they were unable to secure daily employment. In the forty-five days that they remained in the Corpus Christi area, they secured only three days in the fields and earned only ten dollars. They decided to leave in mid-July when they heard that the harvests in Lamesa in West Texas offered more regular employment. After a 650 mile, eight day trip, they found conditions at Lamesa just as bad as Corpus Christi, and in their sixty-five days there the Juárez family earned only eighteen dollars. They were able to eat only by pooling their money with other families in the same situation. Finally, in October, Manuel borrowed money for gasoline to return home, but his car died fifteen miles short of San Antonio. He hitchhiked into the city and persuaded a friend to tow his car into town, where he sold it for five dollars in cash and five dollars in credit from a local grocery store. He used the money to rent a tiny

1 "San Antonio’s Pest Hole of Low Paid Labor, Stirred Again," Weekly Dispatch (San Antonio), July 20, 1934.

2 Quoted in Irene Ledesma, "The New Deal Public Works Programs and Mexican-Americans in McAllen, Texas, 1933-36" (M.A. Thesis, Pan American University, 1977), 54.
shack in the heart of San Antonio’s West Side barrio for him and his six children. When he tried to go back to work at the pecan shelling plant he had left in May, he discovered that all shelling operations had shut down because of a strike by the Mexican and Mexican American pecan shellers he had left behind months before.³ Juárez and his family disappear from the historical record at this point and vanish into the overcrowded, disease-ridden barrio of San Antonio’s West Side.

The Great Depression did not create these problems but it deepened hardships and intensified conflicts that people like the Juárez family had long suffered. The rising agricultural prices of the 1920s disappeared in South Texas as crop prices went into free fall throughout the nation. Farmers responded by cutting already miniscule wages. The interstate migrant stream grew, as more and more of the unemployed turned to farmwork for survival and as New Deal crop reduction programs and the Dust Bowl sent former farmowners and sharecroppers west from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and East Texas into the circuit of agricultural migration. Manuel Juárez found himself competing for lower-paying jobs as he tried to follow the well-worn path of agricultural migration that had supported many of his neighbors in San Antonio’s West Side (as well as a number of other similar barrios throughout South Texas) in earlier times. South Texas jobs did not dry up during the Great Depression; rather local growers benefited from the influx of poverty-stricken migrants. Unlike much of the rest of the country, however, the city of San Antonio and the state of Texas made little if any attempt to

alleviate these problems through direct relief or work relief programs, even after
the New Deal brought federal money pouring into local governments around the
nation.

This chapter examines the stresses placed by the Great Depression on the
system of agricultural and semi-industrial growth that had developed in South
Texas in the years between the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution and the
beginning of the Great Depression. The seemingly endless influx of new
immigrants from Mexico stopped, but the economic crisis of the 1930s helped
maintain the labor market segmentation and web of labor controls that had
developed earlier. The advent of the New Deal did little to alleviate these
problems, as relief money and attempted legislative regulation either did not apply
to the working conditions of South Texas or were fashioned into policies that
aided farm-owners and business interests. By the end of the Great Depression,
even more asymmetrical power relations had developed in South Texas as the
loose strictures employed during the 1920s closed in more tightly around the
citizenship (and human) rights of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.⁴

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⁴ This chapter, as well as Chapters 7 and 8, differ from those that preceded it in focusing almost
exclusively on the situation within South Texas, focusing less on how these people and practices
moved outside of the region. In fact, San Antonio, especially the West Side barrio, serves as the
primary focus. The conditions of the Great Depression and the wide availability of archival
material on San Antonio during the Depression, rather than any conscious decision to restrict the
focus of this chapter, dictated such a shift. While the interstate migrant stream continued to flow
out of South Texas, and while movement continued across the Texas-Mexico border, the
Depression years fostered immobility (social more than spatial) as one of its primary
characteristics. This situation was certainly influenced in part by the passage of laws such as the
Emigrant Agency Law which circumscribed the mobility of Mexican and Mexican American
workers, but it also owed much to the objective economic and political realities of the Great
Depression. Thus, the narrower focus of this chapter developed out of the conditions endured by
the Mexican and Mexican American populations of South Texas which saw their horizons
narrowed as the economic strife of the 1930s proscribed many avenues of their social and
economic lives.
“Poverty and disease were so pervasive in the 1920s that San Antonians were slow to recognize the Depression as a qualitative change,” according to historian Julia Kirk Blackwelder.⁵ While the residents of the West Side may not have noticed an immediate change at the beginning of the Great Depression, a number of progressive journalists, public health advocates, and other like-minded individuals descended on the slums of San Antonio throughout the 1930s to report on the appalling living and health conditions in the densely-populated barrio west of downtown. Journalist Tad Eckam described the city’s slums as a “blighted demimonde.”⁶ Father Carmelo Tranchese, an Italian Jesuit who assumed the helm of the Guadalupe Parish in the heart of the West Side in 1932, claimed, “I am familiar with the slums of San Francisco, New York, London, Paris, and Naples, but those of San Antonio are the worst of all.”⁷ “[T]he West Side is one of the foulest slum districts in the world” wrote Audrey Granneberg in Survey Graphic. “Floorless shacks renting at $2 to $8 per month are crowded together in crazy fashion on nearly every lot. They are mostly without plumbing, sewage connections or electric lights. Open, shallow wells are often situated only a few feet away from unsanitary privies. Streets and sidewalks are unpaved and become slimy mudholes in rainy weather.”⁸

The Chicago-based American Public Welfare Association conducted a public welfare survey of San Antonio in 1939 and 1940 that revealed the

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⁶ Tad Eckam, “Public Housing Day Comes to San Antonio,” America (August 31, 1940), 570.
⁷ Quoted in Richard A. Garcia, Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 75. For a profile of Tranchese and his work on the West Side, see George Sessions Perry, “Rumpled Angel of the Slums,” Saturday Evening Post (August 21, 1948), 32-33, 43-44, 47.
seemingly intractable problems facing the residents of the West Side. It reported
that “there has been mass unemployment, between 15,000 and 20,000
unemployed persons, for over a decade in San Antonio.” 9 Especially hard-hit
were the Mexican and Mexican American populations. 10 In 1931 Mexico’s
Secretariat of Foreign Relations estimated that 19% of San Antonio’s Mexican
residents were unemployed, while other towns in South Texas faced even worse
conditions: 20% unemployment among Mexicans in Brownsville, 28% in
McAllen, and 30% in Corpus Christi. 11 In addition, according to the authors of
the public welfare survey, “The migrant laborer who has residence in San Antonio
plays no small part in the unemployment picture, for his itinerant work at low
wages means a period of complete unemployment at no wages. San Antonio has
for years been a reservoir for a migratory labor supply which is used in many
different sections of Texas, both south and north of the city, as well as northern
states.” 12

As Manuel Juárez and his family found, living on migrant agricultural
labor wages became even more difficult as agricultural prices plummeted, causing
farmers to lower the already depressed wages for seasonal farm labor. According
to Linda and Theo Majka, the national agricultural wage index, with 1927 as the
baseline of 100, dropped to 46 in 1933, the nadir of the Depression, and only

a Local Community (Chicago: American Public Welfare Association, 1940), 27.
10 David R. Johnson, John A. Booth, and Richard J. Harris, The Politics of San Antonio:
Community, Progress, and Power (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 17; Public
11 Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico, Apendizc de la Memoria de la Secretaria de
Relaciones Exteriores de Agoesto de 1931 a Julio de 1932, Presentada a H. Congreso de la Union
por el C. Manuel C. Tellez, Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexico, D.F.: Imprenta de la
Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, 1932), 979-980.
recovered to 65 in 1939 when the looming war in Europe helped raise agricultural prices throughout the nation.\textsuperscript{13} The same pattern held in South Texas. Rates for cotton pickers in the Corpus Christi area, the most productive cotton region in the country at the beginning of the Depression, dropped from seventy-five cents to a dollar per hundred pounds in 1930, to sixty to eighty cents per hundred in 1931, before bottoming out at thirty to thirty-five cents per hundred in 1932.\textsuperscript{14}

Likewise, onion harvesters in Dimmitt County in the Winter Garden earned about sixty cents a day in November 1938, while spinach work near Laredo typically paid a relatively princely sum of $2.50 to $4.00 per week in December 1938.\textsuperscript{15}

A WPA study of migrant workers from Crystal City in the Winter Garden revealed many of the continuities of migrant agricultural labor that persisted into the 1930s. The three hundred families studied throughout 1938 followed a path similar to the migrant laborers of the 1920s, beginning each harvest season in South Texas, moving north for cotton picking, then leaving the state for sugar beet work. The vast majority of Crystal City migrants worked the local spinach harvest from November to March, though they earned a tiny fraction of their yearly income from the winter-long spinach work. Ninety-five percent of these families then left the Winter Garden for work elsewhere. One-third worked briefly in the onion fields of Willacy and Webb Counties, while the rest proceeded straight to the cotton harvests in Nueces County. Beet work then

\textsuperscript{15} Carey McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967 [1942]), 225.
finished the agricultural year, after which the families returned to their home bases in Crystal City. Most of these migrants’ earnings came from the sugar beet work. The vegetable and cotton harvests provided little more than money to cover the trips to and from the beet fields. According to the WPA researcher, “These four crops dovetailed with one another so neatly that in only one month of the year, April, did total family unemployment rise above 4 percent.”

Almost as an aside, however, the researcher noted, “In spite of this regularity of employment, however, wages were so low that many of the Crystal City families were in need at the time of the survey.”

Surprisingly, the industrial work centered in the West Side of San Antonio often offered wages even lower than agricultural work. Cigar and garment factories paid no more than four to six cents an hour to their predominantly Mexican and Mexican American female workforce throughout the Depression. Pecan shelling, the largest industry in San Antonio, paid even less. “[W]ages plummeted to one cent per pound for pieces and one and one-half cents for halves at the depth of the depression,” reported the former secretary of one of the pecan shellers’ unions. “On that basis even the ‘champions’ could earn no more than $1.50 per week; some of the less skilled received only sixteen cents for a week’s

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19 I will discuss the pecan shelling industry at greater length in Chapter 8.
The WPA study of Crystal City migrant laborers, performed during the same year as a study of pecan shellers in San Antonio, found that the “average annual income of the Crystal City Mexicans was about twice that of the urban Mexican group studied in San Antonio.”

The bank failures that proved so damaging to the US economy as a whole also affected Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas. While most earned wages too miniscule to deposit anything in a bank, some had been able to build up some savings during the boom years of the 1920s. The Mexican consular service noted throughout the depression that “the accumulated savings by Mexican workers during long years of arduous labor have been almost totally lost” because of bank failures. While the consular service, understandably, focused primarily on Mexican businessmen on both sides of the border with savings in Texas banks, they also took notice of the problems of emigrant laborers’ financial losses. The San Antonio consulate, for instance, reported that most of the affected Mexican nationals in that city were laborers. The situation became so dire that the Consul General in San Antonio, Enrique Santibáñez, asked the mayor of San Antonio to declare a moratorium on evictions of Mexican tenants unable to pay their rent. The mayor refused the request, however, because

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20 Harold Shapiro, “The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, Texas,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 32:4 (March 1952), 231. Shapiro provides the only claim that wages dropped this low, while four cents per pound seems to be the typical shelling wage during the Depression.


23 The businessmen of Matamoros suffered enormous losses when a series of banks failed in neighboring Brownsville in 1932. See *Apendice de la Memoria de la SRE de Agosto de 1931 a Julio de 1932*, 960.

24 *Apendice de la Memoria de la SRE de Agosto de 1931 a Julio de 1932*, 961-962.
such an action "would be bad publicity . . . [for] San Antonio [which] ranked as [one of the two] American cities holding their own in these strenuous times." It is not clear what the mayor actually meant by this last statement, but he apparently remained unaware or unconcerned about the national notoriety already attracted by the living conditions in the shacks whose rent payments he refused to postpone.  

Chronic unemployment, depressed wages, residential segregation, and the conditions of depression-era migrant labor only exacerbated the problems that residents of the West Side of San Antonio and other barrios throughout South Texas had endured in previous decades. As the author of the public welfare survey stated, chronic unemployment and low wages in combination with residential segregation created "low standards of living, and ultimately ill health, poor housing . . . and their related social problems." The infant mortality rate in San Antonio was 96.3 per 100,000, more than twice the national average. San Antonio also boasted the highest tuberculosis death rate in the nation, at 159 per 100,000 population. That rate more than doubled the state rate of 76 per 100,000. More revealing, however, is the disease rate in San Antonio by ethnicity. The Anglo tuberculosis death rate was 52.8 per 100,000 – less than the state as a whole. Chicanos, on the other hand, died from tuberculosis at a rate of

26 To be fair, it is not clear what legal authority the mayor would have to enforce such a moratorium.
27 See the WPA studies done on Mexican Americans in South Texas: Menefee and Cassmore, Pecan Shellers of San Antonio; Menefee, Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas.
29 Ibid., 86.
302.7 per 100,000.\textsuperscript{30} The crowded and unsanitary living conditions also aided the spread of diseases like measles and whooping cough, leading the American Public Welfare Association to declare, "The teaching of isolation procedures is futile where isolation cannot be achieved in any way. Here again the need for more adequate relief and higher economic standards is only too apparent."\textsuperscript{31}

While relief programs could not have solved these problems, their presence presumably would have ameliorated the worst features of unemployment, low wages, and the problems that flowed out of chronic poverty and overcrowding. During the years before Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency in March 1933, the Hoover administration did little to provide federal relief funds. The creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) allowed for some distribution of relief funds to states and localities, but much of this money went to railroads and other corporations. The advent of the Roosevelt administration opened the possibility of large amounts of federal relief money for states and municipalities through a variety of organs such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and a number of other programs that distributed direct and work relief. The New Deal also offered the first official labor protections through the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 (the right to organize), the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act in 1935 (banned unfair labor practices and established a federally-mandated process of collective bargaining), and the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 (40 hour week, minimum wage, and ban on child labor for most non-family

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 132. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find similar infant mortality and tuberculosis rates for Mexico.
employment). While these programs held out the promise of a rudimentary social welfare net and basic employment rights where none had previously existed, they also excluded a large percentage of the population. Legislators excluded all agricultural workers from these protections in order to pass these laws over objections from Southeastern and Southwestern conservatives.

The migrant farm workers of South Texas, therefore, fell outside of these workers' rights reforms, but they also had a difficult time receiving federal relief funds. The Works Progress Administration distributed surplus commodities and clothing to those in need, but it required anyone receiving these goods to have lived in the state for at least a year and in the county where he or she applied for relief for six months. In order to survive, migrant workers in Texas had to leave the state each year and had to move frequently from county to county, so they fell between the cracks of basic federal relief efforts.

Just as damaging to these migrant workers was the passage and implementation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and its plow-up scheme to raise agricultural prices by removing surplus product, especially cotton, from a glutted market. Farmers were supposed to distribute a portion of their compensation for reducing their crop to tenants and sharecroppers, though most

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33 Texas had already attempted a program similar to the AAA with the passage of the Texas Cotton Acreage Control Law in 1931. Before it could go into effect for the 1932 harvest, however, it was deemed unconstitutional by a state court. In addition, South Texas became one of the showpieces of the early AAA plow-up campaign as the region with the earliest cotton harvest each year. The first farmer to receive a AAA cotton check from the government, William Morris, traveled to Washington, DC, from his farm in Nueces County for a ceremony commemorating the beginning of the program. See Keith J. Volanto, Texas, Cotton, and the New Deal (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 19, 49-50.
simply rid themselves of the suddenly superfluous farm hands. Farm laborers lacked even that unenforced protection, and now found themselves part of a swollen migrant stream competing for even fewer jobs in the fields. The very nature of this problem makes it impossible to quantify the losses suffered by farm laborers due to AAA, but, again, the fate of Manuel Juárez and his attempts to gain employment in the cotton fields shed some light on the difficulties created by the New Deal for farmworkers in South Texas.

In addition, many of these federal relief programs distributed funds to the states, not directly to the intended recipients. The small-government, conservative ideology that dominated the Texas state government guaranteed an almost complete lack of cooperation with the federal government in allocating New Deal funds. The small amount of federal money that ever made it through Austin and filtered down to the local level was often consumed by graft. As a result, after a number of New Deal programs had proven disruptive to the agricultural laborers of South Texas, those due for relief from other New Deal programs had a difficult time collecting any.

Individuals or families seeking direct relief or work relief fared no better in their dealings with the state government than they had with federal relief programs. The state of Texas, for example, spent only 3 ½ cents per person per year on public health, or roughly the same spent on the health of livestock. The Texas Constitution, then and now the outdated constitution written during

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35 McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 228.
Reconstruction, forbade the establishment of a statewide system of relief. Since much federal relief to the states required the state to put up matching funds, there were a series of stand-offs between the Roosevelt administration and the government in Austin over federal money. The federal government often sent the funds anyway after trying to force the state to use some of its own money, but only after long delays in which relief payments stopped for those who relied on them.

Municipal governments throughout South Texas did even less. San Antonio provided the best example of how city and county officials remained either unable or unwilling to match federal efforts to provide relief in the face of almost complete abdication of these duties by the state government in Austin. From January to September 1931, Detroit spent $6.59 per capita for relief, Los Angeles spent $3.40, Chicago spent $2.41, Denver spent $0.79, El Paso spent $0.29, and San Antonio spent only $0.15 per capita. Among cities of similar

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36 Coalson, Development of Migratory Farm Labor System in Texas, 58.
37 Lyndon Gayle Knippa, "San Antonio II: The Early New Deal," in Texas Cities and the Great Depression (Austin: Texas Memorial Museum, 1973), 70-71. According to Knippa, one of these interruptions in federal relief money led to the following: "Another response to the stoppage of relief was a movement to grow food on land assumed to be public domain. Thirty miles west of San Antonio lay 20,000 fertile acres located in the Medina Irrigation Project which was in receivership of the federal courts. Instigated in part by a well-meaning editorial in the Express, over 300 persons moved onto the land to raise their own food before federal marshals evicted the 'squatters.'" Knippa, "San Antonio II," 71-72. Another problem arose from the refusal of state authorities in charge of distributing relief work to allow women to perform tasks they perceived as "nontraditional." Though women made up the majority of San Antonio's industrial workforce and the women of South Texas had long endured the migrant labor stream, the state administrators of the WPA and other agencies rarely gave women relief work outside of sewing, food processing, domestic service, or nursing. Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 120.
38 Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 80.
size, only Memphis spent less on relief per capita than San Antonio between 1937 and 1939.\textsuperscript{39}

When the Great Depression began, a political machine that had maintained control of the city almost continuously since the late 19th century evinced no sign that it would change its habits of graft and apathetic leadership.\textsuperscript{40} While the machine had never provided any semblance of credible governance, the massive population increase during the 1910s and 1920s, especially on the West Side, caught the city government completely unaware. Rather than using public funds to improve the sanitation or infrastructure in an already overburdened city, the increased tax base that came with a growing population merely provided more opportunities for graft.\textsuperscript{41} The city Health Department served as the ultimate symbol of San Antonio’s machine rule. A writer for \textit{Collier’s} magazine asked two “prominent men” what was the most shameful aspect of the machine-run municipal government. Both pointed to the Health Department. “Generally,” according to the author, “a health department is designed to promote the public welfare. In San Antonio it is used as an agency through which collectors shake down that poor, miserable class of females who make their livings as members of the world’s oldest profession.”\textsuperscript{42} As San Antonio’s population descended further

\textsuperscript{39} Public Welfare Survey of San Antonio, 51.
\textsuperscript{40} In 1914 a coalition briefly wrested control from the machine dominated by Brian Callaghan, son of the machine’s first boss and reputed to own most of San Antonio’s thriving red light district, and created a commission government, but within a few years the machine took over the new city commission and dominated it through the 1930s. See Amy Bridges, “Boss Tweed and V.O. Key in Texas,” in Char Miller and Heywood T. Sanders, eds., Urban Texas: Politics and Development (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 64-65; Johnson Booth, and Harris, Politics of San Antonio, vii-x, 8-17.
\textsuperscript{41} See Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{42} Owen P. White, “Machine Made,” \textit{Collier’s} (September 18, 1937), 32-33.
into economic ruin during the Great Depression, all other aspects of the city
government reflected the same level of callous disregard and calculated greed.

Machine politicians simply appointed their successors during these years.
Mayor John Tobin died in 1928, but supposedly made a deathbed request that
District Attorney C.M. Chambers succeed him. Three years later Chambers died
and another deathbed request made City Attorney C.K. Quin the heir apparent; he
remained in office until 1939.43 While the mayor’s seat stayed within this tight
circle of machine loyalists, the power behind the throne was Charlie Bellinger,
political boss of the African American East Side.44 Despite Jim Crow segregation
in public accommodations, San Antonio’s non-partisan municipal elections
eliminated the white primary that had excluded African Americans from voting in
much of the rest of Texas. While African Americans made up less than ten
percent of the city’s population, they accounted for a large percentage of poll tax
payments, and made up a quarter of the voters in all county and municipal
elections.45 While this system did not actually provide the African American
community with any real authority in city and county governance, it did lead the
city to provide basic services to the East Side that it denied to the West Side

43 Granneberg, “Maury Maverick’s San Antonio.”
44 Ralph Bunche described Bellinger as “a Negro sportsman-gambler-racket boss” and a “great
harm to Negro progress because of his unrepresentative stooges, who got positions of
responsibility through his influence in city hall and the school board.” Bunche also argued, “He
was king of the lottery, allowed no competitors, and used his lottery kingdom to deliver votes for
the candidates who would promise protection to this racket.” Ralph J. Bunche, The Political
It is also worth noting that Raymond Brooks, an Austin-based journalist well aware of the political
power-relations in nearby San Antonio, claimed that the real boss of the machine was Jacob
Rubiola, the parks commissioner. Brooks seems to be the only one who held this view, however.
See Richard B. Henderson, Maury Maverick: A Political Biography (Austin: University of Texas
45 Judith Kaaz Doyle, “Maury Maverick and Racial Politics in San Antonio, Texas, 1938-1941”
barrio: paved streets, electricity, water, and sewage connections, and a number of other public facilities.\(^{46}\)

In addition to the thousands of votes regularly in Bellinger’s pocket, the machine also turned to old-fashioned vote-buying outside of its East Side stronghold. According to Emma Tenayuca, a West Side native who emerged as a central figure in attempts to organize Chicano workers in the late 1930s, “I remember as a youngster attending a political rally with my father. Sandwiches were distributed and inside the sandwich was a five dollar bill.”\(^{47}\) In 1938 the nature of this corruption became even clearer when a reformist newspaper, *The Bexar Facts*, printed a series of affidavits of ineligible voters who admitted to receiving poll tax receipts from machine officials.\(^{48}\) A few months later a grand jury indicted Mayor Quin and two of his top aides for spending city money to pay bribes to four hundred individuals for “working around the polls.”\(^{49}\) Not surprisingly, such a city government demonstrated little concern for establishing a system of local relief, preferring to spend municipal funds to maintain its grasp on power.

As a result, “No major city in the United States fought the Depression with fewer weapons than did San Antonio,” as Julia Kirk Blackwelder put it.\(^{50}\) While machine leaders continued to plow municipal funds into vote-buying, gambling, and prostitution, they refused to appropriate any funds for basic relief, mirroring

\(^{46}\) White, “Machine Made,” 33.

\(^{47}\) Emma Tenayuca, “‘I Saw Those Women Herded and Taken to Jail . . .’: The Political, Intellectual, and Social Worlds of Emma Tenayuca,” *La Voz de Esperanza* (San Antonio) 12:7 (September 1999), 5.

\(^{48}\) Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 50.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 189.

the inaction of the state government. Despite having the largest relief load in the state, Quin and other machine officials continued to argue that private charities should handle all relief activities.\(^{51}\) Throughout the depression, the federal government remained the primary, if not the only, source of relief funds for the city and county. The WPA and the National Youth Administration employed thousands, while the FERA supplied surplus farm products to the poor. According to the public welfare survey in 1940, "The federal government with only minor assistance provided relief and service for 94.6 percent of the total number of cases assisted in Bexar County. Private agencies cared in some manner for 4.9 percent of the remainder, and the county government for one-half of one percent."\(^{52}\)

Much of this federal aid relied on local officials to distribute it, however, leading to a familiar pattern of graft and strong-arm tactics through which relief became a means of bludgeoning the poor as much as aiding them. A *San Antonio Express* article from August 7, 1937, announced, "Approximately 1,000 Bexar County families formerly on relief here will head for the Rio Grande Valley to pick cotton or find other means of sustenance Monday, H.K. McBath, district administrator of the Texas Relief Commission, declared Friday."\(^{53}\) McBath also added, "I see no reason for the Federal Government to feed people able to work when work is available. We are not only cutting them off the rolls, but we have cut WPA 'referrals' to virtually nothing."\(^{54}\) As he indicated, WPA job placements

\(^{51}\) Knippa, “San Antonio II,” 84.
\(^{52}\) Public Welfare Survey of San Antonio, 42.
\(^{53}\) "San Antonio Relief Rolls to be Slashed," *San Antonio Express* (August 7, 1937).
\(^{54}\) "San Antonio Relief Rolls to be Slashed," *San Antonio Express* (August 7, 1937).
remained few and far between in San Antonio. In 1939 more than two thousand people certified for WPA employment found themselves without federal employment each month. In spite of the federal money meant to provide relief funds for the San Antonio area, then, public relief agencies remained more concerned about funneling potential farm laborers to the fields of the Rio Grande Valley and guaranteeing a plentiful labor force for local manufacturing concerns. In the hands of local administrators, public works programs became little more than updated versions of tried-and-true labor practices in South Texas, with the shotgun-wielding overseer now replaced by the bureaucrat as the guarantor of surplus labor in the cotton and vegetable fields. What the New Deal variant of this tradition lacked in potential for violence it made up for with economic leverage.

A clue to where this federal money actually ended up can be found in an investigation launched by the Texas Senate into the operations of the Bexar County Board of Welfare and Employment. The number of salaried employees on the County Board fluctuated between 250 and 450 depending on time of the year, and clearly served as a patronage agency that did little more than provide do-nothing jobs for friends of the city machine and allies of the administration in Austin. The board secretary testified that $140,000 had been spent on relief during September 1933, but $35,000 of this went for administrative salaries. By comparison, Tarrant County (Fort Worth) spent $1,300 per month for relief administration. The secretary also admitted that salaried workers bought food from the relief commissaries at wholesale prices, while immediate family

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members of city and county officials received relief payments. The total number on relief was 50,000, or approximately one-fourth to one-fifth of the total population, though it is impossible to know how many of these received relief due to political ties rather than need.\textsuperscript{56}

The investigation that discovered this financial malfeasance had not been launched to provide better service for relief recipients, however. It was part of a patronage battle between different factions in the state Democratic Party maneuvering for some advantage in the upcoming 1934 gubernatorial election. County relief boards provided one of the easiest sources of political patronage, so enemies of the Miriam Ferguson administration sought to discredit Bexar County relief officials so that they could insert their own operatives. Once installed in the relief offices, they could then strong-arm relief recipients into voting for selected candidates.\textsuperscript{57}

Despite the continual flow of federal money into machine coffers, however, the seemingly constant revelations of corruption led to the creation of strong countervailing pressures during the depression to bring an end to machine rule. There had been a number of reform movements in San Antonio since machine government first latched onto the city in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, but one of the most thoroughgoing and successful, if only briefly, arose in reaction to the conditions perpetuated by the machine during the Depression years. This reform movement was led by Maury Maverick, the scion of an old San Antonio family whose name became short-hand for nonconformist rebelliousness in the

\textsuperscript{56} Knippa, "San Antonio II," 75-76.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 75-77.
Nineteenth Century, and was briefly able to bring a form of modern municipal
government to San Antonio.

Maverick won a seat in Congress in 1934 by defeating the mayor of San
Antonio, machine stalwart C.K. Quin, in the Democratic primary.⁵⁸ There were a
number of factors in Maverick’s victory over the machine, but the most important
seem to be his ability to attract large numbers of West Side residents away from
the machine, and even more importantly, his use of the white primary to
disqualify African American voters.⁵⁹ From his seat in the House of
Representatives, Maverick rapidly became one of the most ardent advocates of the
New Deal, becoming the central figure in a group of liberal Congressmen,
predictably dubbed the “Mavericks,” who routinely agitated to expand social
welfare legislation beyond the timid measures taken during FDR’s first term.⁶⁰
While Maverick’s attention remained primarily focused on national issues (a fact
which his enemies would successfully use against him), he did succeed in steering
a number of public works projects to San Antonio, primarily through the WPA
and NYA. He also worked to secure money for slum clearance and public
housing construction to remedy some of the worst public health problems,
especially on the West Side.

(March 1971), 880-895. For a serviceable chronology of Maverick’s congressional career, see
Ronnie C. Davis, Sr., “Maury Maverick, Sr.: The Rise and Fall of a National Congressman,” M.A.
Thesis, St. Mary’s University, 1966.
194-224. Doyle does an especially good job of examining the apparent paradox between
Maverick’s liberal politics and outspoken support of federal anti-lynching legislation, and his lack
of support among African Americans in San Antonio. While Maverick himself felt that African
American voters betrayed him by staying loyal to the machine, Doyle shows that the situation was
much more complicated, with a number of fissures developing within the East Side political
apparatus throughout the 1930s.
⁶⁰ For a contemporary view of Maverick and his allies in Congress, see Stanley High, “The Neo-
Maverick retained his seat in the 1936 election, but faced a determined challenge from the city machine in 1938. Paul Kilday, the brother of Police Chief Owen Kilday, ran a fierce campaign to “eliminate from Congress one who has overwhelmingly shown himself to be the friend and ally of Communism.” An official of the Department of Labor, surveying the San Antonio scene in 1938, wrote, “Unfortunately this city is ruled by the most corrupt ring in the country. It has marked for slaughter at the next election Congressman Maury Maverick, a man I do not know, but he must be on the right side.” In July 1938, Kilday won the primary by a vote of 24,929 to 24,383 for Maverick. Kilday won the Anglo North Side and the African American East Side decisively, while Maverick carried the Latino West Side and the working-class-Anglo South Side. Amidst evidence of vote-buying and other illegal electoral maneuvers by the machine, Kilday replaced Maverick in Washington. While it remained little comfort to Maverick and his supporters, this election revealed that Maverick had again been able to break the machine’s hold on the West Side.

After the election, Maverick determined that he had been defeated because of the grip that the machine maintained over the city. The only way to make sure that this did not happen again was to destroy the machine at the local level.

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62 Joseph Myers to J.R. Steelman, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
63 One interesting, though perplexing, letter outlining the ways in which the machine cheated in order to win the election came to J. Edgar Hoover shortly after the election from a San Antonio businessman named C.O. Trent. He complained about the “machine which cares nothing for health or respect and protects the underworld” which “caused the cheating and fraud of the honest election of Maverick.” At the end of the letter, Trent complained that Maverick, a man from a good American family, was defeated by Kilday and “his Mexican wife and his two offsprings by her.” While there is no indication that Maverick had any knowledge of these complaints by his supporter, the clear implication that Kilday was unfit for office because he married a Mexican woman and had children with her is difficult to square with Maverick’s successful effort to pull the West Side out of the orbit of the machine. See C.O. Trent to J. Edgar Hoover, August 19, 1938, File 230/16/2/2, Record Group 60, National Archives, College Park, MD.
Therefore, Maverick decided to run for mayor in 1939. He challenged Quin, the political nemesis he had defeated five years earlier in his congressional campaign. Quin and the machine appeared more susceptible to electoral challenge than they had in years. Not only had Maverick proved that the West Side could be stripped away from the machine, but grand jury indictments against Quin and his top aides for bribery came down in December 1938 and produced a split within the ranks of the machine between Quin loyalists and those who sought to jettison the troubled mayor. As a result, two machine candidates ran for mayor. Consciously modeling his organization on the coalition constructed in New York City by Fiorello La Guardia, Maverick fronted the Fusion Ticket against the suddenly divided machine forces.

The San Antonio establishment made no secret of its disdain for Maverick, with the *Express* publishing a front-page editorial that accused the former Congressman of "defaming" San Antonio, which they claimed was the cleanest city in Texas. The local AFL, through its *Weekly Dispatch*, endorsed Quin because Maverick openly supported the CIO. Quin also found strong allies in many of the leaders of the Mexican American middle class within the League of United Latin American Citizens. While the organization remained non-partisan,

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64 Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 189.
65 Ibid., 191.
66 Ibid., 192.
67 A full examination of the development of the so-called Mexican American generation and the emergence of LULAC lies beyond the scope of this study. There have been a number of studies of this growing middle class in San Antonio and elsewhere: Richard A. Buitron, Jr., *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Richard Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991); David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*
a number of its leaders were conspicuous at a Quin rally held at Sidney Lanier
High School on the West Side. Despite the opposition of many of the most
powerful political players in the city, Maverick won the 1939 election with 18,375
votes, while Quin received 14,874, and a second machine candidate received
11,503. Journalist Raymond Brooks wrote that Maverick's victory "is a supreme
example that democracy can right conditions, no matter how vicious they get." 69

For the next two years Maverick set about dismantling the structures of
machine government and replacing them with a progressive municipal
government. Even the often antagonistic local newspapers had to admit that
Maverick brought positive change with him. He changed the Health Department
from a national disgrace to one that was recognized by the U.S. Health Service.
Enormous improvements were made in sewage facilities and mosquito control on
the West Side, eliminating some of the most hazardous public health conditions in
the barrio. 70 Maverick was also the driving force behind a campaign to change
the city charter to allow for relief expenditures. 71 He moved to uproot the thriving
red light district west of downtown. Finally, actual civil servants, rather than
cronies and machine loyalists, took over much of the machinery of city
government. 72

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(berkeley: university of california press, 1995); craig a. kaplowitz, luluC, mexican
americans, and national policy (college station: texas a&m university press, 2005); benjamin
marquez, luluC: the evolution of a mexican american political organization (austin:
university of texas press, 1993); george J. sanchez, becoming mexican american: ethnicity,
culture and identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945 (new york: oxford university press,
1993).

68 richard garcia, rise of the mexican american middle class, 213.
69 quoted in henderson, maury maverick, 193.
70 ibid., 215.
71 Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 117.
72 Granneberg, "Maury Maverick's San Antonio."
Maverick also aided in the push for public housing in San Antonio that he had participated in during his years in Congress. Maverick’s ties with the Roosevelt administration helped bring about slum clearance and the construction of five public housing projects in San Antonio.\footnote{One of Maverick’s pet projects, both in Congress and as mayor, was the revitalization of La Villita, the site of the earliest European settlement in San Antonio, with funding from the National Youth Administration. While the Good Government League years later liked to take credit for the revitalization of downtown, it was in fact Maverick and his efforts to restore La Villita and to complete the River Walk project that created the tourist haven on which the city has based much of its economy to the present day. See, for instance, Mary Green interviewed by Esther McMillan, July 13, 1978, Oral History Program, Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas.} The US Housing Authority approved contracts for Alazan and Apache Courts on the West Side, Wheatley and Lincoln Heights Courts on the East Side, and Victoria Courts on the South Side between 1938 and 1940.\footnote{Public Housing Cost Chart, no date, Document 95, Carmelo Tranchese Collection, St. Mary’s University Special Collections, San Antonio, Texas. It is also worth noting that the housing projects were meant to be segregated. Alazan and Apache were for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Wheatley and Lincoln Heights for African Americans, and Victoria for Anglos.}

The first, largest, and most important of these was the Alazan Courts in the heart of the West Side. As the time came to begin construction, however, one large problem arose. In order to build the new housing, old structures had to be removed. The owners of these houses, all absentee slum lords who were in large part responsible for the appalling living conditions on the West Side, stalled in an attempt to force the federal government to pay more for their properties. Nathan Straus, the Administrator of the US Housing Authority, personally stepped in and refused to pay the inflated prices demanded by the owners, writing to Eleanor Roosevelt that the “San Antonio project has been held up by the selfishness and greed of individual landowners.”\footnote{Nathan Straus to Eleanor Roosevelt, April 11, 1939, Document 126, Tranchese Collection.} The delay was brief, however, after local officials pleaded with Eleanor Roosevelt to speak to the president on their behalf,
leading the US Housing Authority reluctantly to accept the prices demanded by the homeowners.\textsuperscript{76} The Alazan Courts opened in 1941, followed shortly thereafter by the adjacent Apache Courts.\textsuperscript{77} While these projects did not eliminate the problems of the West Side, they did alleviate them to a degree. Just as importantly, they showed the capacity for progressive government to achieve some improvement in the general condition of the city after decades of apathetic machine rule.

The reformism inaugurated by Maverick did not win over his numerous enemies in the city, however, and the machine began to regroup immediately after its defeat in 1939, searching for issues and events it could use to discredit the administration in the 1941 election. That opportunity came on August 25, 1939, when the Communist Party held its state convention in a room in the Municipal Auditorium on the northern edge of downtown. Maverick gave them permission to use the room. Opponents demanded that Maverick rescind the permit, but he refused. According to Maverick’s son, “every newspaper in town whipped up an air of hatred.”\textsuperscript{78} Only seven or eight Communists actually arrived at the meeting, primarily because they rightly feared violence.\textsuperscript{79} A mob of approximately five

\textsuperscript{76} Carmelo Tranchese to Eleanor Roosevelt, April 22, 1939, Document 128, Tranchese Collection.

\textsuperscript{77} Because of the activities of the West Side slumlords, however, the West Side projects cost far more to build than the East and South Side projects. Alazan cost $16,352 per acre, Apache cost $19,562, Victoria cost $14,018, Wheatley cost $5,346, and Lincoln Heights cost $6,700. The location of the Victoria Courts, immediately south of downtown, adjacent to the neighborhood that would be demolished in the name of slum clearance into order to build the HemisFair grounds, probably should have been the most expensive if all things were equal. The lack of heavy population density on the East Side explains why Wheatley and Lincoln Heights cost so much less. See Public Housing Cost Chart, no date, Document 95, Tranchese Collection.

\textsuperscript{78} Maury Maverick, Jr., Texas Iconoclast (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997), 39.

\textsuperscript{79} Rudy Wildenstein interviewed by Esther McMillan, January 25, 1979, ITC. A number of Communists, including Emma Tenayuca, tried to cancel the meeting for fear of violence, but State
thousand surrounded the auditorium, then surged into the meeting room and began demolishing the interior of the auditorium, while the Communists managed to escape unharmed through the basement. After rioting in the auditorium, the crowd then took to the streets looting nearby buildings before parading to the Alamo. The mayor’s son, Maury Maverick, Jr., later recalled that the family had to hide at a friend’s house the night of the riot after receiving a series of death threats. “Parts of the mob came to our home looking for us; others went out to intimidate my grandparents,” he wrote. “I saw my father’s career come to an end [that] night.”

The machine used the events of that night to paint Maverick as a Communist-sympathizer in the 1941 mayoral election. With only one machine candidate in this election, Quin won and ended the brief two-year experiment in progressive government. A journalist for the *Light* reported that the machine was “determined to wipe out every vestige of the preceding administration.” Even the arch-conservative *Dallas News* concluded that Quin’s victory meant that San Antonians voted to rid themselves of responsible government.

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In retrospect, the Maverick interregnum brings into greater relief the ways in which the politics of the depression at the federal, state, and local levels did


80 “Riots, Prayers Alternate in Parade to Alamo,” *San Antonio Light* (August 26, 1939).


83 Ibid., 231. While the machine was finally ousted for good in 1955, it was replaced by a new variety of machine called the Good Government League, which maintained complete control of the city until the 1970s. The Maverick administration has remained a rare example of good government in San Antonio.
little to alleviate South Texas's problems in the 1930s. Before 1939, state and local officials evinced little interest in cooperating with federal reformers and instead attempted to use the New Deal programs as either sources of graft or as new tools to enforce control over workers. Only during the two years of Maverick's reign, in addition to his four years in Congress, did any benefit accrue to San Antonio. The New Deal's decentralization was its undoing in South Texas. As a result, the Mexican and Mexican American majority in South Texas found itself fighting to maintain even the unstable existence of previous decades.
Chapter 7: Deportation and Repatriation from South Texas

Goodbye Texas, with all of your plantations.
I am leaving your lands and not picking cotton.
Goodbye Texas, with all of your plantations.
I am being thrown out of your lands for not picking cotton.

“Corrido de Texas”

Espiridión de León came to the United States from Mexico in 1916 and made his residence in Mercedes in Hidalgo County. He married a Texas-born woman in 1927. By 1931 he and his wife had three children, all of whom were US citizens. De León had worked for a local landowner for years. When the deportation drives began in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the late 1920s, he sought to protect himself against the threat of expulsion from the United States by obtaining a notarized statement in 1929 that he had been in the United States for twelve years without returning to Mexico. Despite this precaution, however, immigration agents seized De León in March 1931 while he was walking down a Mercedes street. One officer grabbed him by the collar and shook him, while the other pointed a gun at his head and forced De León to state that he had entered the United States after 1925, in violation of the 1924 immigration act. This coerced confession led to an immediate deportation decision. A few days later De León found himself in Rio Rico, Tamaulipas, unable to return to his family or find a job in Mexico. He was reduced to writing a letter to the Governor of Texas begging

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1 “Corrido de Texas,” undated, Box 33A, Folder 11, Norman L. McNeil Music Collection, South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Kingsville, Texas.
2 John Wilde to Governor Miriam Ferguson, no date, File 301-495-23, Miriam Amanda Ferguson Gubernatorial Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.
3 Court document notarized by S.C. Bates, August 26, 1929, File 301-495-23, Ferguson Gubernatorial Papers, TSA.
4 Espiridión de León to Miriam Ferguson, March 2, 1933, File 301-495-23, Ferguson Gubernatorial Papers, TSA.
for help. Despite De León’s precautions, he had found himself caught up in the machinery of immigration control.

While deportations affected immigrants from countries other than Mexico, immigration officials primarily targeted Mexicans and the Mexican border throughout the Great Depression. Mexicans accounted for more than forty-five percent of all deportees in the years from 1929-1939. Furthermore, the immigration service detained five times as many suspected illegal immigrants in the vicinity of the Mexican border as they did near the Canadian border. Rather than a blanket effort to remove all non-citizens, the well-publicized deportation campaign pursued by the Department of Labor and the Immigration Service fixated primarily on Mexicans as a way to accomplish the failed immigration restriction sought by nativists during the 1920s, with economic necessity replacing the eugenicist arguments of the previous decade.

The deportation net that trapped De León was the most extreme manifestation of governmental efforts to rid the nation of Mexicans, but it was just one aspect of a wide-ranging offensive that targeted Mexicans as scapegoats during the Great Depression. In fact, worsening economic conditions and continued harsh treatment of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas created a major shift in the immigration patterns along the US-Mexico border. While the official immigration numbers from both the United States and Mexico are still

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5 I have not been able to determine what happened to De León or his family after the deportation.
6 Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 53.
8 It is worth noting that deportations dropped substantially after Roosevelt assumed the presidency.
little more than suggestive of general trends, it is clear that massive emigration from Mexico ended during the Depression, and in its place a large-scale migration back to Mexico ensued from across the United States.

Most studies of deportation and repatriation during the Great Depression have focused on campaigns carried on in urban areas of California and the Upper Midwest, but deportation drives swept through South Texas before any other part of the nation.\(^9\) Texas also sent more deportees and repatriates back to Mexico than any other state. In addition, deportation and repatriation from Texas was a largely rural affair, whereas these events took on a much more urban cast in the rest of the nation. Most estimates place the total number of deportees and repatriates during the Great Depression at around one million, or roughly the same number that entered the United States during the years of the Mexican Revolution.\(^10\) Paul Taylor estimated in 1934 that 21.5 percent of the Mexican population in Texas had returned to Mexico since the beginning of the depression. This represented 49.7 percent of all repatriates leaving the United States at a time that Texas claimed 48.1 percent of all Mexicans in the United States. By comparison, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana sent 10.5 percent of the total number

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\(^10\) Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 121-122, 163.
of repatriates while containing only 3.6 percent of the population. California, which contained the second largest Mexican and Mexican American population in the United States after Texas, repatriated only 7.9 percent of its Mexican population. The Upper Midwest repatriated the highest percentage of resident Mexicans, in other words, while Texas produced the most repatriates by far.

Just as important, deportation drives began in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1928, before the Great Depression began. These were not simply random sweeps, but arose directly from the Department of Labor's desire to cut off immigration from Mexico. Since the Immigration Service had been thwarted in its attempts to have Mexico included in the quota laws, officials devised large-scale deportations in the Rio Grande Valley in 1928 as an end-run around the State Department and the repeated legislative failures of John Box and other restrictionists in Congress. After the economic collapse of 1929, these deportation efforts spread to the rest of the country.

Once the Depression began, the scale of deportation only grew, as the machinery set in motion in 1928 continued to operate into the 1930s. The worsening economic conditions, lack of job opportunities, and the threat of potential deportation convinced many Mexicans and Mexican Americans to depart the United States voluntarily for a new start south of the border. The

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Mexican government aided in these deportation and repatriation campaigns through a form of defensive nationalism that sought to bring *Mexico de afuera* back into the national fold, while also stressing the objectives annunciated by Manuel Gamio to utilize the returning emigrants as potential modernizers. In the last half of the 1930s, after the initial momentum of repatriation had subsided, these objectives combined with the revolutionary nationalism of the Lázaro Cárdenas administration to create a series of ambitious colonization programs for returning *repatriados*. Throughout the Great Depression era, then, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States felt pressures on all sides to move south, after decades of being pushed in the other direction.

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One of the earliest deportation drives occurred in May 1928 in the vicinity of the Rio Grande Valley town of Donna.\(^\text{13}\) Near the end of the month the San Antonio District Director of the Immigration Commission stated that "our records as to the number that have been actually deported from this station, Donna, which includes Weslaco, during the month of May to the present time, is 72; that this number included several that were not laborers, some prostitutes, some criminals; also that this number included about thirty persons who were reported by letter, to the inspector in charge at Hidalgo, giving them specific names and places where they were located; the others were those encountered during the regular routine

\(^{13}\) Located in Hidalgo County, the site of Donna was first settled by Anglos in 1839 when a man named John Webber moved there from Austin with his wife, a freed slave, to escape discrimination for their interracial marriage. In the 1910s, the site would be an important irrigation pumping station on the Rio Grande. See James Anthony Sandos, "The Mexican Revolution and the United States, 1915-1917: The Impact of Conflict in the Tamaulipas-Texas Frontier upon the Emergence of Revolution," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 78.
work of the Border Patrol.”¹⁴ Not surprisingly, a great cry of indignation rose up in response to these deportations because, as one local complained, “I had been told that the laboring conditions were being unfavorably hampered through the activity of the Border Patrol.”¹⁵ Congressman John Garner, one of the most forceful voices opposing quotas for Mexican immigration, jumped into the fray to protect the Valley’s labor supply, but the deportations continued anyway.¹⁶

In April 1929 the district director of the Brownsville immigration office reported that more than 2,600 had been deported to Mexico from the district, while hundreds more remained in custody awaiting deportation.¹⁷ Almost twenty thousand were deported from the Rio Grande Valley in 1929 alone.¹⁸ These raids had the predictable result of sowing fear in the Mexican and Mexican American communities of South Texas, with many refusing to leave their homes for fear that they would be arrested and sent to Mexico. The raids that took place in 1928 and 1929 primarily targeted Mexican neighborhoods and workplaces, but tactics changed after the stock market crash and the Depression that followed.

With economic justification added to the restrictionist logic of the first deportations, raids shifted to places like hospitals and health clinics, while one particularly shocking raid in March 1931 saw immigration officials launch raids on El Paso public schools, resulting in the detention of more than 500 school

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¹⁴ Statements of William Whalen and T.W. Hooks, May 26, 1928, File 55609/358, Box 438, RG 85, USNA.
¹⁵ Statement of Mrs. M.M. Huffer, May 26, 1928, File 55609/358, Box 438, RG 85, USNA.
¹⁶ Acting Commissioner-General George Harris to John Garner, June 12, 1928, File 55609/358, Box 438, RG 85, USNA.
¹⁸ Balderrama and Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal, 49.
children.\textsuperscript{19} Whole communities were uprooted as deportation rates continued to accelerate, rising as high as 450 from the Brownsville district in one month during the spring of 1931.\textsuperscript{20} As in the Espiridión de León episode, these arrests almost always occurred without warrants and often came through coerced confessions and guilty pleas.\textsuperscript{21} By the end of 1931, however, deportations from the Rio Grande Valley declined as large-scale raids ended and the Border Patrol and immigration service shifted their focus to other parts of the state and the country. Only after the stock market crash, however, did these campaigns begin in areas other than South Texas. The Mexicans and Mexican Americans of the Lower Rio Grande Valley had confronted the threat of forced removal for two years before the same forces came to bear on the barrios of California.\textsuperscript{22}

The momentum of deportation, in other words, accelerated after the stock market crash signaled the severity of the coming crisis. The economics of the Depression and increased unemployment throughout the nation amplified nativism, leading many to call for the expulsion of immigrants rather than limits to their entry. The anti-Mexican sentiment of the 1920s was quickly redirected into efforts to strip Mexicans and Mexican Americans of their rights of citizenship and the physical right to remain within the United States. Fears that illegal (or simply non-white) immigrants might drain public coffers through relief payments

\textsuperscript{19} McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation," 133, 146. El Paso is obviously not in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, but the audacity of this raid warrants its inclusion in a discussion of deportation from Texas.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 111-112.
\textsuperscript{21} This procedure did not change until 1934 when immigration officials changed the regulations to require a warrant before raids and arrests. McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation," 130.
\textsuperscript{22} Deportation campaigns began in California in the summer of 1930, but the most famous raid did not occur until February 1931 at La Placita in the middle of one of the largest Los Angeles barrios. See Balderrama and Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal, 57-58; Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans, 71-83.
led federal, state, and local officials to carry out well-publicized deportation campaigns throughout the nation after two years of trial-and-error provided by operations in South Texas.

In many ways, the pro-immigration forces of the 1910s and 1920s introduced the argument that allowed many to rationalize the necessity and even the righteousness of deportation during the 1930s. Their argument that Mexicans, defined as a racial group rather than a nationality, possessed an innate homing instinct that always drew them back to Mexico after time traveling and working in the United States became the self-fulfilling justification for removing Mexicans. Restrictionists and anti-restrictionists came to the same conclusions during the Depression. The workers who had been so sought-after during the farm boom came to be seen as a potentially catastrophic economic drain after the market collapsed and unemployment skyrocketed. Mexican Americans also fell under this scrutiny. The overly simplified notion that “Mexican” connoted an unchanging racial categorization meant that many U.S. citizens of Mexican descent found themselves adrift on this tide of cranky nativism and oppressive state activism after the focus of the deportation campaign shifted in the early 1930s. “When it became apparent last year [1932] that the program for the relief of the unemployed would assume huge proportions in the Mexican quarter, the community swung to a determination to oust the Mexican,” reported Carey McWilliams in Los Angeles in 1933. “Thanks to the rapacity of his overlords, he had not been able to accumulate any savings. He was in default in his rent. He was a burden to the taxpayer. At this juncture, an ingenious social worker
suggested the desirability of a wholesale deportation.”

Though his description of these events drips with angry sarcasm and speaks specifically only of the Los Angeles area, McWilliams captured the basic reasons why large-scale campaigns of deportation and repatriation spread across the country.

Complaints of stolen jobs and a sort of economic populism that depicted Mexicans as the stooges of the wealthy and powerful were the most common manifestations of anti-Mexican sentiment in depression-era Texas. For instance, the Bricklayers and Masons International Union, an all-white union with locals in San Antonio and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, complained vociferously to the Department of Labor and the War Department that construction jobs on military bases throughout the region went to Mexicans. In December 1930, the secretary of the San Antonio local wrote to the international about work at Fort Sam Houston: “On December twenty second there were thirteen Mexicans and four white mechanics employed at six dollars a day. The wages were then reduced to four dollars per day. Consequently the white men refused this cut, leaving the aliens to complete present masonry work. . . . Will the government employ a contractor who discriminates not only against organized labor but the white race as well?”

The secretary of the international then wrote to the Department of War, complaining that the union saw no reason why the military “preferred Mexicans to Americans, especially during the present unemployment crisis.”

Around the same time the international secretary also received a letter from Rio

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24 Roland T. Diller to John J. Gleeson, December 27, 1930, File 170/6377, Box 218, Record Group 280, Department of Labor, National Archives, College Park, MD.
25 John J. Gleeson to F.H. Hayne, August 5, 1931, File 170-6566, Box 224, RG 280, USNA.
Grande City (Starr County) complaining that all masons and carpenters on jobs at Fort Ringgold were Mexican. "It seems a pity in the face of this depression that our own government would do this when American citizens of these two crafts are walking the streets without employment and in need of work to support their families and pay the heavy taxes and such expenses as it takes to keep their homes," wrote the local union officer. 26

Along the same lines, a man from Wharton, Texas, complained to the Immigration Commissioner, "Mexicans are a curse upon Texas, pest in our white schools, and burden on relief and pension rolls. They come across to work on the farms, soon drift north to towns and cities, forcing more negroes out of employment and onto relief rolls." He continued by demanding that the immigration service not allow more Mexicans into Texas. "I imagine Rep. Cleberg [sic] [owner of the King Ranch] will be asking you to lift ban on Mexicans as he (rather his wife) owns perhaps over a million acres down in the vicinity of the valley. It would be good if such estates as that would have went under during this depression, but they got most of the AAA benefits." 27

In this unique juxtaposition the writer depicted Mexicans as a means to achieve greater concentration of landholding in the same way that AAA payments served as subsidies to large growers, clearly invoking a variety of economic populism based on white privilege.

Seeking to take advantage of these widespread nativist feelings, a number of publications sensationalized crimes committed by illegal immigrants and

26 Thomas W. Lewis to John J. Gleeson, June 14, 1931, RG 280, USNA.
27 George Wheeler to Chief of United States Immigration Commission, August 7, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, USNA.
publicized a number of social problems supposedly created by immigrants. Hearst newspapers, the Chicago Tribune, and the Saturday Evening Post called for the removal of immigrants, but they were not alone. In 1935, Texas Congressman Martin Dies, the father of the House Un-American Activities Committee, published an article in the Saturday Evening Post in which he claimed that no unemployment problem would exist in the United States if the millions of immigrants who had entered the nation since 1880 had been barred from entry. He introduced several bills during the 1930s calling for stricter deportation practices to eliminate millions of illegal immigrants. While Dies often drifted from issue to issue, he clearly viewed anti-immigrant demagoguery as a path to personal political advancement in the same way that he latched onto anti-communism in the late 1930s in a bid for national prominence.

The deportation campaign shifted accordingly in 1931 as the Great Depression deepened and calls for Mexican removal became more insistent. From 1928-1931 most deportees were sent to Mexico for either illegal entry or for lack of documentation, in keeping with the immigration-restriction focus of the late 1920s. After 1931, however, more deportees were caught for vagrancy violations and sent back to Mexico as individuals “likely to become a public charge,” signaling a shift to a tactic more in line with the economic crisis of the 1930s.

For those caught within the machinery of deportation there was little if any recourse against the growing momentum of nativism that swept through every

28 See Balderrama and Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal, 54.
29 McKay, “Texas Mexican Repatriation,” 125.
level of the law enforcement establishment. Once detainees appeared in court they often faced judges who had predetermined their guilt. One federal judge in particular, F.M. Kennerly, compiled an astonishing sentencing record in South Texas. He heard seventy illegal immigration cases in a six-hour session in July 1931, at the peak of the deportation drive in the Valley, and found all seventy guilty. Eleven went to prison and fifty-nine were deported. A three-hour court session in Laredo that same year yielded ninety-eight convictions in ninety-eight cases, seventy-two of whom were deported.  

The situation in San Antonio, however, was much different. Unlike the Lower Rio Grande Valley and other portions of deep South Texas, the Federal Court in San Antonio prosecuted individuals for illegal entry at a rate far below the courts further south. In fact, impressionistic evidence points to an increased Mexican and Mexican American population in San Antonio’s West Side barrio as many left areas like the urban Upper Midwest and rural South Texas to avoid deportation. The explanation for the limited number of deportations from San Antonio, according to Julia Kirk Blackwelder, “lies most probably in the city’s heavy dependence on the marginal labor of Hispanics, especially women.”

Many arrested for immigration violations did not go to trial, however, as officials allowed them to choose voluntary deportation. This method meant that deportees returned to Mexico without a misdemeanor conviction and therefore maintained the option of returning to the United States legally.  

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31 Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 14.
32 A law passed on March 4, 1929, made the illegal entry of an individual a misdemeanor for the first time. Corwin, “Story of Ad Hoc Exemptions,” 146.
deportees never made it as far as a hearing before a judge, then, instead simply relinquishing any claim to remain in the United States for the possibility of returning at a later date when more auspicious economic conditions returned. While the coercive nature of these “voluntary” deportations are obvious, they did allow some hope for eventual legal return to the deportees and cut down on the bureaucratic workload of immigration officials and the federal court system.

More important numerically than deportees, however, were repatriates who left for Mexico for reasons other than legal entanglements. There were any number of reasons why Mexicans, and even some Mexican Americans, chose to leave the United States during the Great Depression. Some left because they wanted to return to their homeland rather than remain in a country that clearly sought to get rid of them. Others left because chronic unemployment did not allow them to keep up with the higher cost of living in the United States, made worse by the fact that non-citizens were ineligible for public works employment. Fears of deportation led many to depart. This variety of repatriate became much more common during the peak of deportations in the early 1930s in South Texas and elsewhere, and was the desired result of the deportation raids which sought to frighten Mexican communities as much as remove illegal entrants. Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout the nation knew of the deportation drives in places like South Texas and Los Angeles through word of mouth and extensive coverage in the Spanish-language press. Others left with help from local charity organizations that sought to rid their communities of Mexicans, while a number of municipal relief boards chartered trains to transport Mexicans on relief rolls out of
the country. The large number of repatriates who accepted these offers of transportation only strengthened the notion held by both nativists and their opponents that Mexicans remained little more than temporary sojourners who would all eventually return south of the border.\textsuperscript{33}

The Mexican government also emerged as a driving force behind repatriation. The southward flow of returning immigrants occurred at the same time as consolidation of the post-revolutionary state in Mexico City entered its final stages. With the turmoil of the 1920s behind them, the government energetically sought to draw the substantial pool of emigrants back to Mexico to aid in the modernization of the nation. Before 1934, the consular service provided transportation for destitute Mexicans (and some Mexican Americans) to return south of the Border, while the Cardenista state sought to lure repatriates back to Mexico as raw material for its ambitious land reform program launched in the second half of the decade.\textsuperscript{34}

From the beginning of the depression the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, through the consular service, sought to provide aid for those hoping to repatriate. As early as 1930 the Secretary of Foreign Relations reported that the National


\textsuperscript{34} The nature of this study makes a thorough examination of the Cardenista state impossible. While there is a rapidly growing historiography on the revolutionary nationalism of the Lazaro Cardenas regime, there are a few basic studies that examine the successes and failures of the aggressive reformism of the period from 1934-1940. See Moisés González Navarro, Mexico: El Capitalismo Nacionalista (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2003); Nora Hamilton, The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Alan Knight, “The Rise and Fall of Cardenismo, c.1930 – c.1946,” Leslie Bethell, ed., Mexico since Independence, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 241-320; Albert L. Michaels, “The Crisis of Cardenismo,” Journal of Latin American Studies 2:1 (May 1970), 51-79.
Irrigation Commission hoped to provide land for returning migrants in previously arid sections of the North. These efforts in the early 1930s served as little more than temporary palliatives during the depths of the depression. The Callista leadership that remained in power until 1934 ignored ejidal land reform, instead hoping to establish small-scale capitalist farming throughout the nation. They believed that collective farming had failed, and hoped that repatriates would bring with them sufficient capital to establish themselves as small-scale landowners and independent farmers.

An early example of these attempts to integrate repatriates back into the nation came with the establishment of the Don Martín Colony in Coahuila and Nuevo León, about fifty miles from Laredo, Texas. The construction of a dam on the Rio Salado created a massive irrigation network across the previously arid region, opening up an enormous expanse of cultivable land, in individual plots, that attracted Mexicans and Mexican Americans eager to leave Texas. Throughout 1930 and 1931 prospective colonists left for the Don Martín Colony, and by mid-1931 almost all of the land had been distributed. Almost all of the colonists had returned to Mexico from Texas, and found initially that they could actually make more money there than north of the border where cotton prices remained low. Despite an auspicious beginning, however, the Don Martín Colony soon ran into a number of problems, from insufficient federal funding to

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35 SRE, Memoria de la SRE de Agosto de 1929 a Julio de 1930, 1712.
36 Knight, “Rise and Fall of Cardenismo,” 247.
37 The Don Martín Colony was one of several established throughout Mexico, but it was the most important for this study as it was soon dominated by repatriates from Texas.
severe drought. By the end of 1931 the Mexican government had already begun
to transport colonists elsewhere to alleviate worsening conditions. Much of the
colony was deserted by the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{39}

The difficulties created by these frustrated hopes for repatriation had a
profound effect on the agrarian situation in Mexico, however. The repatriates
helped intensify a growing desire for more radical agrarian reform.\textsuperscript{40} Due to these
growing pressures, from the beginning of the Cárdenas regime in 1934 a different
set of priorities dominated policymaking. Mexico City paid less attention to the
shrinking flow of repatriates, in decline since 1931, and focused more intently on
rapid land reform, trying to alleviate the spreading problems of the depression
within Mexico rather than the problems created within the United States.\textsuperscript{41}

Nevertheless, the new regime found itself cleaning up the messes left over from
earlier colonization projects. In 1936 Cárdenas distributed thousands of acres of
public land to destitute colonists, while also shipping a number of other former
repatriates to agricultural colonies in Tamaulipas. By the end of the decade
almost all of the remaining Don Martín colonists subsisted on government relief
funds.

\textsuperscript{39} Guerin-Gonzalez, Mexican Workers and American Dreams, 105. Curiously, Abraham Hoffman
wrote that the Don Martín Colony was a success, though he does note that government
expectations that large numbers of repatriates would be able to purchase their land rarely came
true. See Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans, 145. Presumably, this is because he relied
primarily on James Carl Gilbert's anthropological study of Mexican repatriates and simply
assumed that the hopeful tone of the early days of the Don Martín Colony continued throughout
the depression.

\textsuperscript{40} Paul Friedrich, Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1970); John Gledhill, Casi Nada: A Study of Agrarian Reform in the Homeland of Cardenismo
(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991) 86.

\textsuperscript{41} Moisés González Navarro, “Efectos Sociales de la Crisis de 1929 en Mexico,” in Mexico: El
Capitalismo Nacionalista, 501-516, esp. 507.
The Cardenista government attempted to construct one other large-scale colonization project in northern Mexico for repatriates, primarily from Texas. In the spring of 1939 work began on the construction of an agricultural colony meant entirely for repatriates near Matamoros, Tamaulipas, named the “18 de marzo.” Undersecretary of Foreign Relations, Ramón Beteta, undertook a campaign to publicize the undertaking throughout the United States, but received little interest outside of Texas. Throughout South Texas, however, Beteta was met with enthusiasm at each stop.\(^\text{42}\) Importantly, Beteta wrote to Cárdenas that most of the prospective repatriates were U.S. citizens.\(^\text{43}\) Whether this meant that these potential colonists simply wanted to leave the United States or that they responded to the revolutionary nationalism of the Cárdenas regime, clearly there was a substantial number of Mexican Americans despondent enough over their condition in Texas that they sought expatriation. According to the Texas Farm Placement Service, the “purpose of the project is to establish Mexicans on redistributed farm lands in Mexico, principally in the State of Tamaulipas. . . . The applicants for land must be agricultural workers; and if accepted, they receive certain initial assistance from the Government.”\(^\text{44}\) Beteta hoped to attract 15,000 families to the colony.\(^\text{45}\) Instead, a little more than 7,500 repatriates from throughout South Texas arrived at the “18 de marzo” Colony by the beginning of


\(^{43}\) McKay, “Texas Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression,” 414.

\(^{44}\) “Origins and Problems, Texas Migratory Farm Labor,” page 78, September 1940, Farm Placement Service, Texas State Archives.

\(^{45}\) “Mexico to Take 15,000 Families Back from United States,” \textit{Houston Chronicle} (April 18, 1939).
1940, taking up newly irrigated land on the site of an expropriated hacienda.\textsuperscript{46}
Like the Don Martín Colony, however, lack of funds and drought doomed the colonization efforts to failure, even though the federal government had expected far more than 7,500 colonists. The end of the depression and renewed demand for labor in the United States in the early 1940s sounded the death knell of these colonization efforts.

Even before the 1940s, however, there was at least of trickle of return migration to the United States by repatriates who found conditions in Mexico even worse than those they left north of the border. While the official immigration statistics again provide little help in uncovering this northward migration during the depression, by 1937, according to historian Arthur Corwin, “some repatriates were still heading south, but many more were slipping back to work for former employers or to rejoin relatives in the United States. . . . It seems likely, according to interview statements from old repatriates, that many of the repatriados were back in the American border states by 1941.”\textsuperscript{47} Most of those who tried to reenter the United States found their way blocked by more stringent application of immigration laws and more liberal usage of the “likely to become a public charge” exclusion. Those who had received assistance from charities to pay for their transportation to Mexico were especially targeted as unfit to reenter

\textsuperscript{46} The Farm Placement Service gave slightly different numbers, reporting, “In addition to these 4,451 Mexican agricultural workers who have returned permanently to Mexico as Repartitionists, immigration authorities have assisted 1,266 agricultural workers to return to Mexico from the Lower Valley alone.” “Origins and Problems,” 80.
the country. Thus, many repatriates found themselves stranded between two nations struggling to reemerge from the depths of the Depression, with neither government willing or able to help them. Many simply entered illegally rather than deal with the red tape and probable rejection that came with applying for legal entry.

Those who did return north of the Rio Grande during the late 1930s found that agricultural interests still welcomed them. In fact, growers continued to call for more Mexicans to come and harvest their crops even at the height of deportations and repatriations back to Mexico. Their voices were often drowned out in the early years of the Depression, but by the late 1930s the familiar refrains of farmers declaring acute labor shortages could be heard loud and clear. This renewed demand for labor from Mexico reached its peak in 1936 and 1937, when growers throughout South Texas bombarded the federal government with dire predictions of economic ruin if a labor supply could not be found. Beginning in the summer of 1936, growers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley complained that they did not have sufficient labor for what promised to be one of the largest cotton harvests in years. Additionally, weather conditions during the spring and summer delayed the harvest by about three weeks, so Valley cotton growers had to compete with harvests in the cotton fields near Corpus Christi. According to the INS Inspector in Charge at Brownsville, the farmers of the Valley “started paying from 40 cents to 50 cents for their cotton picking at the beginning of the season.

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49 The only study I have found that deals with these cries for renewed immigration from Mexico during the Depression is in Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 137.
A great many farmers from up state, where cotton was also opening at the same
time although ordinarily it opens from three to four weeks later than the Valley
cotton, came here, offered more money to available pickers and hundreds of
Valley residents left for up state to pick the cotton there at better prices."\(^{50}\)
According to the Valley Morning Star, with the labor situation "rapidly reaching a
 crisis, protest has been filed with the U.S. Labor Bureau office at Fort Worth,
against alleged practice of growers of the Corpus Christi-Robstown area in
trucking laborers from this section with the promise of higher pay."\(^{51}\) The
McAllen Chamber of Commerce even went so far as to demand a law that
prevented truckers from taking workers out of the Valley during harvest time,
hoping to create an intrastate version of the Emigrant Agency Law.\(^{52}\)

Growers called for the end of these labor recruitment practices, the
complete suspension of all public works projects, and the institution of a guest
worker program similar to that established during World War I.\(^{53}\) Despite these
requests, according to the State Administrator of the WPA, "District Immigration
Director Whalen stated in telephone conversation he opposes this because there
will be only about thirty days of this work and experience has taught that cost of
importing labor and then returning it to Mexico, particularly latter, is not justified
by results obtained. He stated this service is still trying to find and expel some

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\(^{50}\) D.W. Brewster to District Director at Galveston, August 6, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, USNA.
\(^{51}\) "Cotton Picker War Flares in Southwest Again," Valley Morning Star (July 31, 1936).
\(^{52}\) "Cotton Picker War Flares in Southwest Again," Valley Morning Star (July 31, 1936).
\(^{53}\) WPA Division of Social Research, "Summary of Reported Shortages of Cotton Pickers in
Texas, August 1937," September 15, 1937, File 530/47/24/6, Record Group 174, Department of
Labor, USNA.
Mexicans who were imported for this purpose during the war."\textsuperscript{54} Despite repeated refusals by the federal government to accede to a renewed foreign contract labor program, growers continued to agitate for workers during the 1937 and 1938 harvests.\textsuperscript{55} As will be discussed in the Chapter 9, growers did not get their wishes until 1942 when US entry into World War II changed the situation and allowed growers to depict their demands for labor as essential to the war effort.

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An examination of the deportation and repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the late 1920s and 1930s from South Texas reveals two major flaws in the historiography. First, the overwhelming focus of many historians on California and the Midwest has ignored the primacy of Texas in the geography of deportation and repatriation. Despite its historiographical dominance, California sent relatively few deportees and repatriates back to Mexico.\textsuperscript{56} The Great Depression did not alter the history of South Texas as an integral avenue for large-scale migration, even if this migration changed from the agricultural labor stream of the 1920s into the southward trail of repatriation during the 1930s.

Second, the deportation and repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas began before the Great Depression. This outburst of

\textsuperscript{54} H.P. Drought to Nels Anderson, August 4, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, USNA.
\textsuperscript{55} WPA Division of Social Research, "Investigation of Reported Shortages of Cotton Pickers in Texas, August 1937," September 15, 1937, File 530/47/24/6, Record Group 174, Department of Labor, USNA; J.R. Steelman to Frances Perkins, March 24, 1938, File 530/47/24/6, Record Group 174, Department of Labor, USNA.
activist immigration control was not simply a case of scapegoating in reaction to economic crisis. Instead, the initial campaign of deportation in South Texas served as the law enforcement fulfillment of nativist desires after legislative action had failed earlier in the 1920s. The economic collapse in the years after 1929 may have added to the momentum of the deportation and repatriation campaigns in Texas and the rest of the nation, but they did not create the situation. The Great Depression was more than coincidental to the law enforcement campaign that inundated Mexican and Mexican American communities throughout the nation, but it was not the sole factor in the emergence of large-scale deportations. The focus on California and the Midwest has therefore distorted the nature of deportation and repatriation by ignoring the origins of this nationwide campaign in the Lower Rio Grande Valley before the onset of the Great Depression. This truncated version of history has allowed historians to cast the campaigns as a departure from previous decades when, in fact, they represented the logical conclusion of the nativist agitation of the previous decade.

The Great Depression, therefore, did not represent a cataclysmic shift in the history of South Texas, but rather the amplification of trends that had grown throughout the 1910s and 1920s. The temporary decline in migration from Mexico to Texas was the exception to this rule. The years from 1928 to the outbreak of World War II were a time of increasingly aggressive nativism and overt challenges to the citizenship rights of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, complicating the already difficult economic and political situation under which they toiled. Rather than succumb to these growing pressures during the
Depression, however, the Mexicans and Mexican Americans of South Texas launched a series of challenges to the political and economic system that had been built on their backs. Voluntary repatriation and participation in the agricultural colonies in Mexico served as one method of resisting these worsening conditions. Those who remained in the region, however, launched a different sort of resistance through workplace struggles that proposed basic but thoroughgoing reforms in the political economy of South Texas.
Chapter 8: “Pauper Paid Labor in Revolt”: Organization and Rebellion in Depression-Era South Texas

“It is my duty to interfere with revolution, and communism is revolution.”
Owen Kilday, San Antonio Chief of Police

On Friday, February 25, 1938, two hundred and forty men found themselves crowded into the Bexar County Jail, which had a normal capacity of sixty. Police arrested roughly two hundred of these inmates in the previous week in cracking down on what San Antonio’s Chief of Police referred to as a revolution. Almost all of them were charged with illegal picketing or blocking a sidewalk, crimes they committed in an effort to improve wages and working conditions in the pecan shelling industry. Despite their crowded conditions, and the fact that many of the prisoners nursed wounds from street battles with police, the jail soon echoed with songs and jeering exhortations. The most popular song, soon heard throughout the jail, declared “Kilday esta loco,” referring to San Antonio’s Chief of Police. Others sang mockingly of the “Pecan Czar,” against whom the prisoners had been striking when arrested. After a few hours of this raucous behavior, interspersed with complaints against overcrowded conditions, the City Jailer declared that he could not control the prisoners. Chief Kilday arrived shortly thereafter and directed police officers to turn fire hoses on the singing inmates. Beyond violating the most basic rights of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans arrested for activities protected by the First Amendment, Chief Kilday also provided a perfect symbol of official reactions to working-class

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2 Quoted in “Testimony Ends in Strike Action,” San Antonio Express (February 26, 1938).
protest movements in South Texas—rather than allow these efforts to expand into a full-fledged social movement, Kilday tried to drown them in the county jail.3

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The ad hoc system of labor controls developed in earlier decades combined neatly with the possibility of expulsion from the United States to create an even more potent system of employer control over labor. In spite of these conditions, however, the agricultural and semi-industrial workers of South Texas waged a sustained, if largely unsuccessful, campaign of labor organization during the nineteen thirties.4 The efforts by Mexican and Mexican American workers to organize themselves revealed many of the same broad outlines as labor clashes in more industrialized areas. New Deal labor legislation heightened workers' expectations and drove them to confront their employers in South Texas as they did throughout the nation. Further, many of these organizational efforts grew out of wildcat strikes and walkouts in reaction to the steadily worsening working conditions of the Great Depression. But these unionization efforts in South Texas exhibited a series of complications not present in the CIO and AFL organization drives in the Midwest, Northeast, or even the Southeast. Employment segregation

3 "Chief Kilday Quells Outbreak with Fire Hose," San Antonio Express (February 26, 1938); George Lambert interviewed by George Green, November 1971, Oral History Collection, Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas at Arlington; Mrs. M.M. Adams, Mrs. Hetty Browne, Mrs. Eron Dies, Mrs. Louise Warren, and Mrs. Cassie Jane Winfrey to C.K. Quin, Maury Maverick, and James Allred, March 5, 1938, File 530/47/24/6, Record Group 174, Department of Labor, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

4 Most historians of the Great Depression and the US labor movement have ignored these efforts for unionization and workers' rights in San Antonio and other towns in the region. For instance, no mention is made of any of these activities in Robert H. Zieger, The CIO, 1935-1955 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). Episodes like the San Antonio Pecan Shellers Strike in 1938 have received substantial attention from Chicano historians and historians of the Southwest, as will be obvious from the growing historiography sprinkled throughout the footnotes of this chapter. While the agricultural strikes in California during these years continue to draw more attention from the profession as a whole, more historians are also looking to the events in South Texas as important aspects of the regional effects of the Great Depression.
and falling wages combined with the growing fear of deportation to create a volatile situation in South Texas when the violently anti-union businessmen of the region confronted the largely Mexican and Mexican American workforce. This confrontation ended in defeats or, at best, pyrrhic victories for the workers. But as Paul Taylor wrote in describing the San Joaquin Valley cotton strike in 1933, "As the faulting of the earth exposes its strata and reveals its structure, so a social disturbance throws into bold relief the structure of society, the attitudes, reactions, and interests of its groups." The strikers' efforts made visible the violence of South Texas labor relations that had remained largely hidden in the years since the Plan de San Diego as police, vigilante groups, and the Texas Rangers reprised their familiar roles.

The first outbreak of organizing occurred in November 1930 during the spinach harvest in Crystal City. The Catholic Workers Union of Crystal City, presided over by Rev. Charles Taylor of the Crystal City parish, demanded wages determined "not simply by what [employers] can get out of [the workers], but what [the] laborers need to live," as well as an end to outside labor recruitment when a sufficient supply of workers lived within the immediate vicinity of the spinach fields. Less than a week after forming the union and going out on strike against the spinach growers, twenty-five growers agreed to most of their

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7 Reverend Charles Taylor, "To the Growers or Farmers of Crystal City," November 10, 1930, Series 3, Carton 12, Folder 30, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.
demands. Wages increased, outside labor recruitment diminished, and general working conditions improved. One result of this settlement, according to Rev. Taylor, was that higher wages allowed more children to return to school during the spinach harvest than in previous years. After the settlement, however, the Catholic Workers Union disappeared. A few more years would pass before another agricultural union emerged in South Texas.  

In August 1933 another organizational effort began in Laredo with the formation of the Asociación de Jornaleros, which welcomed agricultural laborers as well as miners, construction workers, and other Mexican and Mexican American laborers. According to one of the leaders of the Asociación, “We formed our organization when the NRA was inaugurated.” The militantly anti-union county machine harassed the Asociación throughout 1934, almost crushing the organization through the use of blacklisting, agents provocateurs, and the threat of deportation. The arrival of the onion harvest in March 1935, however, revived the Asociación as it took over a walkout among onion cutters demanding higher wages and better work conditions.

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8 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 272.  
10 José Jacobs to Senator Robert La Follette, May 5, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.  
11 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 273. José Jacobs wrote, “We have a city and county government entrenched in power for some thirty odd years. This click [sic] represents principally the old landowners class, the remaining vestige of a semi-feudal ruling class, and through their merciless political machine and all kinds of terror had been able to suppress all political opposition until some five years ago. At that time an opposition political party was formed, headed, and firmly controlled by relatively new coming big American onion growers, ranchers, and oil men... Though this political club had powerful financial, legal, and mass backing, when elections came it lost entirely because of the gangsterlike terror and other illegal methods use by the machine in power.” Jacobs to La Follette, May 5, 1936, CAH.
Before the strike onion workers in the Laredo area earned about sixty cents for a twelve-hour day throughout the one-and-a-half- to two-month harvest season. These wages would have been low even if work was guaranteed, but surplus labor made it difficult to guarantee employment throughout the season for individual workers. Many laborers drove to the fields at their own expense to find that they could secure only a few hours’ work at best. The strike began as a spontaneous protest by 1,200 onion workers against these conditions, and the Asociación soon moved in to lead the strike effort. In a petition sent to growers and the Webb County Chamber of Commerce, the union demanded $1.25 for a ten-hour day, more than a one-hundred percent raise, with twenty cents per hour overtime pay. They also asked that drinking water be placed in the fields near the workers, that employers pay for transportation to and from the fields, and that growers pay for the treatment of any injuries suffered on the job. “We represented the workers of the onion fields and approached the growers for collective bargaining regarding wages, etc.,” José Jacobs of the Asociación wrote. “The growers disregarded us completely and the result was our first and only strike.” The union refused to negotiate with individual growers, demanding instead a uniform agreement covering all Laredo-area onion growers.

According to the Laredo Times, “strikers timed their actions just as growers in

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12 José Jacobs interviewed by Ruth Allen, October 15, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 12, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH.
13 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 273-274.
14 Francisco Hernandez and Dionisio Rosales to Webb County Chamber of Commerce, March 29, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
15 José Jacobs to Senator Robert La Follette, May 5, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH.
16 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 274.
this section were ready to start the movement to market of some 1,000 carloads of onions.”

For four days (April 12-15, 1935) strikers lined US Highway 83, leading from Laredo to the onion farms, and attempted to block all traffic to and from the fields. Estimates of total numbers of strikers blocking the roadway varied from 300 to 2,000. Accusations of communist infiltration soon swept the city. Rumors floated through the area that angry workers planned to dynamite bridges leading out of Laredo. Fears of violence escalated even further when, on the night of April 14, growers were able to send three truckloads of strikebreakers through the picket lines after mounting a machine gun on the top of the lead truck, though the workers from two of the three truckloads left the fields and joined the strikers. Deputy Sheriffs acted as escorts for this armed convoy under the orders of District Attorney John Valls, the king of the county political machine. After this incident, District Judge J.F. Mullally, another important figure in the county machine, sent an urgent request to Austin for Texas Rangers, writing, “Peace

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18 Both the high and low numbers were given by Department of Labor conciliator J.R. Steelman for the same day, April 15, so it is difficult to say which is more accurate. Both estimates were also given in letters to the same man, H.L. Kerwin, Director of Conciliation for the Department of Labor. J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 15, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA; J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 20, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
19 J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 20, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
20 J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 15, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA; J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 20, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
21 Zaragoza Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton University Press, 2005), 118.
officers and onion growers request me to apply to you for sufficient men to
control the onion strike situation which is beyond the control of local officers.”

A prominent grower, H.G. Samuels, agreed to accept the union wage of
$1.25 a day for ten hours on April 13, but the union rank-and-file refused to sign
the individual agreement, afraid that signing a partial agreement would bring the
strike to a halt as workers left for the fields. Department of Labor conciliator J.R.
Steelman, who had been called into the area by the Webb County Chamber of
Commerce, tried to get the workers to sign the contract with Samuels, afraid that
the strike could turn violent if an agreement was not reached. Few doubted that
the situation would change once Texas Rangers appeared.

The Rangers arrived on April 15 and immediately cleared the highway of
strikers, breaking the blockade. Fifty-nine strikers had been arrested by noon on
April 16. J.R. Steelman wrote that the “Texas Rangers and the operators
thought the proper way to handle the situation was to drive the workers back to
the field.” Still, Steelman was able to elicit an agreement from a few growers in
the Laredo area for wages of $1.25 for a ten-hour day. On the night of April 16

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22 Quoted in “Judge Mullally Wires for Rangers in Onion Strike, Laredo Times, April 15, 1935.
23 Five Rangers came to Laredo: Captain Will McMurray, Zeno Smith, Mario Williamson, Martin
Trejo, and Alfred Allee. “530 Strikers Back at Work,” Laredo Times, April 16, 1935. Allee was
the son of the man who killed a Mexican landowner near Laredo in 1911, as discussed in Chapter
2. Allee also played a prominent role in the Valley Farm Worker Strikes in 1967, as discussed in
the Epilogue. The Rangers were also involved in a labor struggle in Nueces County in November
1935 as they attacked striking longshoreman in Corpus Christi. Not surprisingly, it was Alfred
Allee who instigated the violence, hitting a longshoreman several times with the butt of his
shotgun after a brief verbal altercation in which Allee claimed that one of the longshoremen had
called him a “scab-herder.” He then pointed his shotgun at a group of longshoremen and
threatened to kill them all if he ever saw them again. See testimonies collected in Box 2E304,
Folder 12, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH.
24 J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 20, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of
Labor, USNA. None of those arrested remained in jail for more than a day, as the police chief
released them so they could go work in the fields.
25 J.R. Steelman to H.L. Kerwin, April 20, 1935, File 182/326, Box 370, RG 280, Department of
Labor, USNA.
the workers agreed to the contract, and the strike ended. While the union and its rank-and-file still doubted that the agreement guaranteed that things would not return to status quo ante as soon as the federal conciliator left, threats of violence and deportation from local law enforcement, the Rangers, and growers led them to end the strike.²⁶ The union declared a victory, but Steelman remained more circumspect in his immediate reaction to the settlement, telling the Laredo Times that “it was only a compromise. The growers missed a good opportunity to make another strike this season impossible had they come in and mutually signed the agreement. . . . The growers must change their attitude. They must learn that times have changed and that workmen do have the right of collective bargaining.”²⁷ Even though Steelman overstated the protections provided to agricultural workers by the NIRA or Wagner Act, his predictions soon came true as most growers maintained wages around sixty cents a day. When the union made noises about renewing the strike, all growers repudiated the $1.25 a day wage level. No strike followed as most of the workers feared violence and seemed to have lost confidence in the union’s ability to accomplish anything.²⁸ In

²⁶ See, for example, José Jacobs to Senator Robert La Follette, May 5, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, CAH.
²⁷ “Onion Strike Off; Rangers Gone,” Laredo Times, April 17, 1935.
²⁸ Jamieson, Labor Unions in American Agriculture, 275. Despite the seeming failure of this strike, the Asociacion de Jornaleros was later given a charter by the AFL as the Agricultural Workers (Federal) Labor Union No. 20212, in attempt to compete against the CIO’s Texas Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in 1937. The AWOC tried to establish locals throughout South Texas, and started to make some headway in the cotton fields of the Lower Valley, but soon disappeared. See “CIO’s on Job – Texas Cotton Pickers No Longer Slaves,” CIO News, August 31, 1937; J.R. Steelman to Frances Perkins, March 24, 1938, File 530/47/24/6, RG 174, Department of Labor, USNA.
the end, the growers probably benefited from the delay in harvesting. Market
prices for onions increased during the strike.\textsuperscript{29}

While these setbacks muted unionization efforts in the Laredo area for
much of the rest of the decade, a little less than a year after the onion strike
another attempt to organize workers occurred. Juan Richer, Mexican Consul in
Laredo, presided at a meeting of the Asociación de Jornaleros on March 13, 1936,
after Benjamin R. Hill, Consul-General at San Antonio, presided over the
founding of a new labor organization called the Confederation of Mexican and
Mexican-American Laborers in San Antonio on March 11.\textsuperscript{30} A Laredo Times
reporter kept shorthand notes of the Laredo meeting. Richer reportedly stated that
he was aiding the Asociación “by instruction of my government.” The reporter
also recorded speeches by a number of union leaders, including the statement of
Emilio Martinez that “[w]e are always intimidated on the fact that we are
Mexican citizens and that we have no rights in this country, but we do have rights,
and this gentleman here (pointing to the Consul) is the one who is going to
demand those rights.”\textsuperscript{31}

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\textsuperscript{29} F.H. Crockett to INS Commissioner, March 17, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, INS, USNA.
\textsuperscript{30} Details of the organization founded in San Antonio are very sketchy, as is the role of Consul-
General Hill in this episode. The Confederation was founded “under sponsorship of the Mexican
consulate general,” but I could find little more about it. “Mexicans Form Labor Society,” San
Antonio Express, March 11, 1936; J.R. Steelman to Frances Perkins, March 26, 1936, File
195/349, Box 98, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA. It is also mentioned in report from the
INS Inspector in Charge in San Antonio, who wrote that the new labor organization was founded
to counteract the activities of the company union established by Southern Pecan. W.W. Knopp to
INS Headquarters, March 17, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, INS, USNA. This entire episode will
be discussed in great detail later in the chapter.
\textsuperscript{31} 3 pages of notes on March 13 meeting, File 55854/100, RG 85, INS, USNA.
Cries of foreign subversion soon followed, with Congressman Martin Dies turning to his continual refrain of communist infiltration.32 The Texas State Deputy of the Knights of Columbus wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull to complain that Richer “presided at meeting of radical element here in Laredo.” He further claimed that Richer acted under orders from President Lazaro Cardenas “to organize labor groups in the United States,” which represented “unwarranted interference with American affairs” by a foreign government.33 After the State Department registered complaints with the Mexican government, the Secretariat of Foreign Relations replaced Richer as consul and recalled him to Mexico City.34 But an anonymous informer, writing to J.R. Steelman, revealed that the Richer episode was actually an abortive attempt to revive the onion strike from a year earlier: “Indeed, it did look as if we were going to have the same old trouble this year, the only difference this time was the Mexican Government seemed to have taken upon its shoulders to agitate the trouble and organize the Mexicans and Mexican-American citizens. However, the publicity which has resulted from the meeting in San Antonio and the one here and the resultant investigations by various departments of our government has completely broken the back of this Mexican government interference in our affairs, and we do not look for any

33 William Galligan to Cordell Hull, March 16, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, INS, USNA.
34 Gilbert G. Gonzalez, Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 47. The Secretariat of Foreign Relations made it very clear a few years earlier that the consular service should not take part in any strike activities or assume leadership roles in any labor organization. See Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Informe de la SRE de Agosto de 1933 a Agosto 1 de 1934, Presentada al H. Congreso de la Union por el C. Dr. José Manuel Puig Casauranc, Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexico, DF: Imprenta de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1934), 411-412.
further trouble when the onion shipments start.’ The author’s impressions proved correct, as organizational activities in the border counties continued to decline throughout the rest of the 1930s.

While the labor movement unraveled in Laredo, CIO unions, primarily the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), began to move into other parts of South Texas. One UCAPAWA organizational effort occurred among shrimp hullers in Aransas Pass in 1937 and 1938. Located along the Gulf Coast just north of Corpus Christi, the town served as the home of the Rice Brothers Cannery. Shrimp shelling occurred almost entirely during the fall, with only a few workers remaining throughout the year. The seasonal workers often had to turn to agricultural labor during the off-season. Even during the peak of the season the average worker made only about $1.50 per day. These processing workers dealt with many of the same problems of low wages and seasonal unemployment as did their farm worker brethren. A writer for the *San Antonio Express* described shrimp shellers as unskilled workers who “present a totally different problem from the transient cotton and fruit picker, who can follow the seasonal harvestings.”

The strike began as a spontaneous walkout of 350 workers after the cannery slashed wages near the end of October 1937. According to A.J. Holmes

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35 J.R. Steelman to Frances Perkins, March 26, 1936, File 195/349, Box 98, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA. Emphasis added.
37 List of those who peeled shrimp on September 12, 1938, no date, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
of the shrimp hullers’ union, “The shrimp peelers have been peeling a small bucket of shrimp which holds about 6 lbs of shrimp for 5 cents and they happen to be small shrimp. So when they began to get larger shrimp which Mr. Rice gets more for, Mr. Rice proceeds to swap out a large bucket which holds 2 times as much shrimp and tells them that is all he is going to pay.” The UCAPAWA moved in and took over the strike effort, but the strike fell apart after seven weeks when the union representative in charge (possibly A.J. Holmes) took all of the strike funds and disappeared. Disgusted, the workers went back to work.

To protect against another strike, Rice Brothers tried to establish a compulsory union under the company’s control, but the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) declared it an illegal company-dominated union in December 1937. Because of the NLRB ruling against Rice’s union, the CIO decided to try its luck among the shrimp shellers the next year. An organizer arrived in July and began to piece the local back together. Throughout August the UCAPAWA representative met with Rice management, but they refused to consider any contract because Mexican workers “have no idea what a contract is made for and have no conscientious scruples about breaking a contract at will.” The union decided to strike at the peak of the season, starting September 14, 1938.

That morning, as the union set up a picket line around the plant, a group of armed men assaulted the pickets. It is not clear who these people were, but the

39 A.J. Holmes to Joseph Myers, no date, File 199/867, Box 462, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
40 Summary of Shrimp Hullers Strike by Conciliation Service, September 28, 1938, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
41 Rice quoted in Summary of Shrimp Hullers Strike by Conciliation Service, September 28, 1938, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
scant evidence points toward white Rice employees from the boat and cannery divisions. One of the attackers died, another was shot (probably a case of friendly fire), and several more were injured. The president of the local, Christopher Clarich, was beaten into a coma and remained in critical condition for weeks, during which time he was indicted for the murder of the vigilante. As a result, he received a twenty-year prison sentence and became a cause celebre nationally for the UCAPAWA and CIO.  

A few more days passed before negotiations restarted, but after several days of fruitless meetings the NLRB commissioner convinced Rice to accept a contract that allowed for collective bargaining and pledge of non-discrimination but ignored issues of wages. Rice finally accepted on the night of September 26, 1938. The next day the agreement went before the union, where it passed by only two votes. The NLRB commissioner reported that “all of the white members and the intelligent Mexicans who understood English [voted] to accept and all the other Mexicans [voted] against it.” Those who voted against the agreement threatened not to return to work, but came around the next day when Christopher Clarich approved the agreement from behind bars. The strike thus ended with union recognition but no improvement

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42 See “UCAPAWA Yearbook” from Second National Convention, December 1938, Box 1, Folder 12, AR-36, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union of America Papers, Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas at Arlington; Donald Henderson to UCAPAWA locals, no date (1941), Box 1, Folder 1, AR-36, UTA. Unlike all of the other strikes dealt with in this chapter, the county sheriff’s deputies and the Texas Rangers both served as impartial agents in Aransas Pass, standing guard over the picket lines to avoid another violent incident.  
43 Summary of Shrimp Hullers Strike by Conciliation Service, September 28, 1938, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.  
44 Conciliation Service Progress Report, September 28, 1938, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.  
45 Conciliation Service Progress Report, September 28, 1938, File 199/2425, Box 503, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
in the wage scheme that had caused the first outbreak a year earlier, another pyrrhic victory for unions in South Texas.

The final depression-era attempt by the UCAPAWA to organize processing workers in South Texas occurred in 1942 in the spinach fields surrounding Mathis (San Patricio County, near Corpus Christi). Field workers began the organization effort in January 1942 when the F.H. Vahlsing Company cut wages from ten cents to seven cents per bushel of spinach. By the end of the month more than one hundred Vahlsing workers had formed a union and secured a charter for a UCAPAWA local. While the field workers predominated, the union also attracted truck drivers and packinghouse workers. They demanded not only a restoration of the wage cut, but also a series of other community-wide reforms to improve workers' quality of life. While Vahlsing refused to recognize the union, the pressure placed on the town by the union's campaign quickly yielded results. On March 10, completely without warning, Vahlsing restored picking wages to ten cents per bushel and the local theater owner to agree to allow Mexicans and Mexican Americans to sit where they pleased, rather than only in

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46 Nelson-Cisneros’s essay on the UCAPAWA in Texas is the only mention I have found of the Mathis union in the secondary literature, despite a surprisingly large amount of correspondence between UCAPAWA officials and Telesforo Oviedo, the migrant farm worker who led the effort in Mathis. See Box 1, Folder 1, AR-36 and Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, both in the Texas Labor Archives at UT-Arlington.

47 Vahlsing was mentioned in Chapter 3. He began as a grocer in New York, but decided to buy land in the Winter Garden to provide off-season crops for stores in the East. He became one of the largest producers in the region during the 1920s, and by the 1940s had acquired holdings throughout South Texas.

48 Donald Kobler to William Carnahan, January 21, 1942, Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, Texas AFL-CIO Papers, Texas Labor Archives, UTA.
balcony seats. The local high school even began night classes for field workers, which ran four nights a week.

While it achieved these victories, the union also tried to consolidate its position within the Vahlsing workforce, which the international realized required strong support among the truck drivers and packing house workers. By May, however, the spinach season had ended and the union had not convinced Vahlsing to sign an agreement. An NLRB petition filed by the UCAPAWA international had to be withdrawn as the seasonal workers moved out of the Mathis area, but Regional Director Donald Kobler assured Telesforo Oviedo, head of the local, that they would be able to pick up where they left off in the fall if Oviedo discussed their situation with "the leading workers." Kobler wrote, "I am very anxious to have a permanent and stable organization established among these agricultural workers for several reasons. They will not only be able to do themselves a service, but will be maintaining a base from which a broad campaign among agricultural workers can be launched when the International is in a position to put up the necessary funds." Despite these hopes for a stable organization from which the UCAPAWA could achieve a substantial presence in the fields of South Texas, the local had disappeared by the beginning of the next spinach season. In November 1942 Kobler wrote Oviedo to tell him, "Effective November 15, I will no longer be on the payroll of UCAPAWA. Because of the need for concentrating in the larger industrial areas, the International Union will

49 Telesforo Oviedo to Donald Kobler, March 11, 1942, Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, UTA; UCAPAWA Press Release, February 22, 1942, Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, UTA.
50 Donald Kobler to Donald Henderson, March 25, 1942, Box 1, Folder 1, AR-36, UTA.
51 Donald Kobler to Telesforo Oviedo, May 25, 1942, Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, UTA.
no longer have a representative in Texas.\textsuperscript{52} So ended the briefly successful organizational effort in Mathis. Unlike the previous organization and strike efforts, however, this one failed because of lack of support from the UCAPA rather than threats or overwhelming violence.

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To the north of these events in the border counties and along the Gulf Coast, the largest and most sustained unionization efforts in South Texas took place in San Antonio, where a series of strikes erupted among the Mexican and Mexican American factory workers during the years from 1933-1938.\textsuperscript{53} The industries that had come to San Antonio to take advantage of its low wages and exploitable work force suddenly confronted a thoroughgoing, sustained effort for improved working and living conditions. During these years San Antonio witnessed the flowering of what Vicki Ruiz described as a "cannery culture" among the primarily female work force: "This was an intermingling of gender roles and assembly line conditions, family and peer socialization, and at times collective resistance and change. The significance of gender cannot be overstated, as women composed" the vast majority of the work force "and were clustered into specific work areas."\textsuperscript{54} But these organizational efforts on the West Side also went beyond the creation of a workplace culture of socialization and

\textsuperscript{52} Donald Kobler to Telesforo Oviedo, November 2, 1942, Series 16, Box 5, Folder 2, AR-110, UTA.

\textsuperscript{53} The labor movement in San Antonio is probably the only aspect of the Great Depression in South Texas that has a substantial historiography. The primary works, focused especially on the pecan shellers' strike are: Blackwelder, \textit{Women of the Depression}, 67-150; Garcia, \textit{Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class}, 61-108; Green, "ILGWU in Texas," 144-145; Jamieson, \textit{Labor Unionism in American Agriculture}, 278-280; Menefee and Cassmore, \textit{Pecan Shellers of San Antonio}; Shapiro, "Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, Texas," 229-244; Vargas, \textit{Labor Rights are Civil Rights}, 81-143.

\textsuperscript{54} Ruiz, \textit{Cannery Women, Cannery Lives}, 32.
collective resistance. They became an essential catalyst for the effort to bring democracy to San Antonio that briefly flourished late in the decade. It was the workers of the West Side who served as both the object lessons of the consequences of municipal incompetence and who carried the city into its brief interregnum of good government.

The lack of any real municipal efforts to deal with issues like working conditions or public health meant that the potential for abuse by employers remained a constant threat, beyond the well-established history of low wage rates in San Antonio. These conditions allowed for two parallel developments. The first was the establishment of factories that housed pecan, garment, and cigar workers. The necessity of a surplus labor pool for this sort of low-wage work meant that these factories were all located within the West Side barrio, which not only provided a local workforce but also assured that Mexicans and Mexican Americans filled all of these jobs due to the effects of residential segregation.

The second development in the 1930s was the explosion of homework in each of these industries, a phenomenon much more prevalent on the West Side than in any other part of the city.\textsuperscript{55} Even the negligible public health protections provided by the rudimentary factories on the West Side disappeared for homeworkers, with whole families crowded around a kitchen table sewing children’s clothing or shelling pecans in order to provide a bare subsistence. The Roosevelt administration and the NRA attempted to regulate homework, but federal guidelines that called for health inspections and other protections for workers remained unenforced on the local level while the machine held political control of

\textsuperscript{55} Blackwelder, \textit{Women of the Depression}, 67, 83-84.
the city. Because these operations all occurred on the West Side, these two strands of economic development remained hidden from view until the workers themselves began to pull back the veil in the mid-1930s.

The San Antonio Trades Council, through its newspaper the *Weekly Standard*, occasionally provided some comment on working conditions on the West Side. In January 1934 the paper reprinted a speech given by the chairman of the Regional Labor Relations Board, Reverend Peter Wynhoven, in which he stated that San Antonio was the "most deplorable spot for the workingman in the United States." After claiming that conditions in San Antonio were far worse than any other city in the South, the reverend fumed that if "one-half of the cities in the United States had such deplorable working conditions, there would be a revolution. It is a great surprise that San Antonio people are so long suffering and patient." In July of that same year the paper's lead headline screamed, "San Antonio's Pest Hole of Low Paid Labor, Stirred Again." A few months later a writer in the *Dispatch* argued, "The selfish few that would profit from this low paid labor employment, are not of the citizenship that cherish great pride in the city's history and progress, but are newcomers from other cities suffering from a congested population that has been exploited by them, or their predecessors, until education and a desire for higher citizenship has drained their reservoir of low

56 Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Texas Homeworkers in the 1930s," in Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels, eds., *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 75-90. One of the many public health measures passed by the Maverick administration was a ban on industrial homework in San Antonio. While the measure had as much to do with middle-class fears of purchasing products made in unsanitary environments as any concerns over worker safety, it did help eliminate some of the worst features of the homework system.


paid labor. . . . San Antonio is the last frontier for this class of exploiters." The only mention made of homework came in January 1937, when the paper noted with some surprise, "We are told that an authentic survey has revealed between 15,000 and 20,000 families who eke out a precarious existence from employment in their homes, such as shelling pecans, garment and handkerchief making, which, sad to state, are oftentimes [sic] mere hovels for which words can scarcely be found to portray the squalor existing in them."  

Cigar making, garment assembly, and pecan shelling dominated the job market on the West Side and served as employers of first and last resort for the thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans crammed into the barrio. While pecan shelling remained the least desirable and lowest paid throughout the 1930s, the other two industries also maintained miniscule wages and appalling health and safety conditions in their facilities, adding to the already acute public health crisis on the West Side. Because of these conditions and the refusal of employers or the city government to deal with them, the West Side witnessed one organization campaign and strike effort after another from 1933-1938, culminating in the massive pecan shellers' strike that the city machine decried as an attempted revolution.

The cigar industry was the first to undergo this turmoil. The Finck Cigar Company dominated the industry in San Antonio, employing about 800 women in 1933. Wages hovered around twenty cents an hour, but workers also faced a series of penalties that often drove their actual wages even lower. One of the

most galling of these penalties was a fine of three good cigars for every poorly rolled one, though Finck still sold the supposedly ruined cigars. But this was just one of the cigar workers’ many grievances. Any workers who did not produce their quota of cigars from the material given to them had to pay the difference back to Finck. For each minute that workers were late, they were docked one cent from their already meager wages. There was no punch-clock to determine when they arrived at work, however. Instead, one woman’s job was to remember who was late to work and by how much. The opportunities for abuse in this system are obvious. Workers were also only allowed five minutes to use the restroom each day. Finck would often enter the women’s restroom to remove workers he thought had spent too much time away from their work. The company also placed a quota of five-hundred cigars on each worker, but did not allow them to go over the quota. If a worker finished a few hours before the workday ended, they had to stay in the factory until Finck allowed them to leave. Finally, Finck refused to abide by the newly created NRA Cigar Code, which set wage minimums at thirty cents an hour.

While anger over these issues had simmered for years, the strike broke out in August 1933 when four hundred women, under the leadership of Mrs. W.H. Ernst, walked out in the first major strike in depression-era San Antonio. This first strike lasted for a month before the mayor, C.K. Quin, intervened and had each

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61 “Mr. E. Finck, In Cigar Strike Hearing, Refuses to Appear before Industrial Commission,” Weekly Dispatch, December 6, 1935; Ruth Allen notes on Finck Cigar Strike, no date, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH.
62 Ruth Allen interview with Miss Gonzalez, October 7, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 12, UT-CAH; Ruth Allen with Mrs. W.H. Ernst, October 8, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, UT-CAH; “Mr. E. Finck, in Cigar Strike Hearing, Refuses to Appear before Industrial Commission,” Weekly Dispatch, December 6, 1935.
63 Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 133.
side send representatives to try and negotiate an end to the strike. Finck agreed to improve conditions, though he never made clear what that entailed, and hire back the strikers on the condition that Ernst could not return to work. The workers reluctantly accepted the agreement, though Finck refused to sign anything. In the end, some of the strikers were hired back while about one hundred remained blacklisted. The company also reduced penalties for poorly-rolled cigars from three to two well-rolled cigars. Wage rates remained below the NRA-mandated thirty cents and hour, with strippers earning $0.175 per hour and rollers earning $0.225 per hour. Inexplicably, though, the NRA accepted Finck's refusal to abide by industry standards and awarded the company a Blue Eagle.64

The 1933 strike was just the first of several staged against Finck during the mid-1930s. Conditions failed to improve after the first strike, Finck continued to refuse to rehire some of the initial strikers, and the bizarre, often dictatorial, practices that had initially spurred the workers' anger continued unabated.65 The next walkout came in August 1934 after Finck ignored the agreements he had made with the workers and the NRA and again cut wages and increased penalties for work deemed substandard. Unlike the first strike, however, the union attempted to keep strikebreakers from entering the cigar factory. A number of violent confrontations resulted between strikers and replacement workers. As a result, the San Antonio Police and Bexar County Sheriff's Department became

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64 Mrs. W.H. Ernst interviewed by Ruth Allen, October 87, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH; Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 132-133.

65 The refusal to hire back the leaders of the first strike caused the NRA to revoke Finck's Blue Eagle, with Ed Finck declaring, "We will close the plant down before we put those four people back to work." "Finck Cigar Co. Returns Blue Eagle Rather than Comply with Labor Board Findings," Weekly Dispatch, September 28, 1934.
involved in this second strike, after remaining on the sidelines in 1933. Chief of Police Owen Kilday, a prominent machine official, instituted a policy of unrestrained hostility toward strikers that would continue throughout the strike waves of the 1930s. Kilday and Sheriff Albert West threatened to arrest and deport all picketers who refused to return to work, and on a few occasions sheriff’s deputies threatened strikers in their own homes.\textsuperscript{66} Mayor Quin remained conspicuous by his absence in dealing with this strike, instead allowing Kilday to crush it as he saw fit. When it became clear that Finck and the city government were determined to defeat the strikers, they called off the 1934 strike after a few months.\textsuperscript{67}

A new strike broke out in March 1935, however, over these same issues of low pay, horrible working conditions, and dictatorial management, with the final outrage coming when Finck raised the penalty for poorly-rolled cigars from two to four.\textsuperscript{68} The police and sheriff’s deputies continued their determined efforts to crush the strike, especially after a number of violent outbreaks between strikers and strikebreakers during the first few days of picketing. A number of these instances of violence were at least partially instigated by the police, who escorted strikebreakers past the picket line. There were also instances of police trying to force strikers into the factory to work.\textsuperscript{69} A writer for the \textit{Weekly Dispatch} noted, “Evidently the management had arranged for the protection of the law, and Chief

\textsuperscript{66} Vargas, \textit{Labor Rights are Civil Rights}, 81.
\textsuperscript{67} Mrs. W.H. Ernst interviewed by Ruth Allen, October 87, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH; Blackwelder, \textit{Women of the Depression}, 133-134.
of Police Kilday, and Sheriff A. West, with their assistants, were on hand to protect the sanctity of property against the personal rights of the workers.\textsuperscript{70} The Cigarmaker's Union tried to force Finck into arbitration through the new protections in the Wagner Act, but the company refused, intent on continuing to use the police to maintain operations during the strike. After eight months, the strike ended with Finck employing a completely non-union workforce. As a final insult, all strikers found themselves blacklisted throughout the city after the strike ended.\textsuperscript{71}

While the 1935 strike ended in failure, it set the tone for the strikes that followed, as increasingly militant workers confronted more aggressive and overt police interference, which only increased the intransigence of San Antonio's employers. It was against this background of growing tensions that the garment workers' and pecan shellers' strikes occurred in the aftermath of the collapsed cigar efforts. Kilday and city officials remained the chief backers of the city's employers, while a number of future activists emerged from the Finck strikes as militant organizers determined to create some change in the economic and social relations of San Antonio.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{71} Miss Gonzalez interview with Ruth Allen, October 7, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 12, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH. Mrs. Ernst stated that she and a number of other strikers could only find work with the WPA, and all worked together on a sewing project. See Mrs. W.H. Ernst interviewed by Ruth Allen, October 87, 1936, Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH. An interesting side-note to the Finck Cigar episode is that the company still operates in San Antonio. There is a company history on their website, but it fails to mention the strikes of the 1930s. In addition, an internet search for "Finck Cigar" turns up an endorsement for their products by Rush Limbaugh.

\textsuperscript{72} See Emma Tenayuca interviewed by Gerry Poyo, February 21, 1987, Oral History Program, Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas; Geoffrey Rips, "Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells Her Story," \textit{Texas Observer} (October 28, 1983), 7-15. In addition, the labor organization formed in San Antonio in 1936 with the help of the Consul-General, mentioned above, included a number of former cigar strikers. Mrs. W.H. Ernst was president of the Confederation of Mexican
Shortly after the organizational efforts began in the cigar factories, women in the city’s garment factories also sought to use the opportunities accorded them by the passage of the NRA to increase wage rates and improve working conditions. Unlike the cigar industry, which had a long history in San Antonio, the garment industry was a relative newcomer to the city. Protective legislation passed in the Northeast, especially New York, led many clothing manufacturers to establish assembly factories in places like San Antonio. As a result, the industry grew rapidly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Like the pecan-shelling industry discussed below, these factories were almost completely non-mechanized, relying instead on hand work provided by workers earning wages far below those in the more mechanized eastern garment assembly plants. The strikes that occurred from 1934-1938 emerged out of similar conditions as those at Finck Cigar.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) began operations in San Antonio in 1933 in an effort to raise wages in the industry’s cheapest labor outpost. Actually, workers claimed that some companies sent some work further south to Laredo, where wages were even lower. There was also an instance of a contractor in Laredo farming out work from a San Antonio factory to homeworkers across the border in Nuevo Laredo. This came to light only after the contractor was arrested multiple times for carrying the unassembled fabric across the border. See Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 99-100.

The union’s early activities sought not only to organize as many of the Mexican and Mexican American female workers as possible, but also to use the NRA as leverage against companies reluctant to submit to voluntary, government-mandated standards. The NRA code for the garment industry required a wage of thirty cents an hour for southern states (two cents

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and Mexican-American Laborers, while Tenayuca and other activists and workers involved with the Finck strikes held other positions within the short-lived labor organization. See “Mexicans Form Labor Society,” San Antonio Express, March 11, 1936.

Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 97.

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below the wage level for the rest of the country). The U.S. District Attorney for San Antonio even filed an injunction against one of the garment manufacturers for violating the NRA code.\(^7\) These complaints by federal officials, however, fell on deaf ears according to a writer for the Weekly Dispatch. The employers of the city sought “to make San Antonio a cesspool for low paid workers” by contending that “Southwestern garment manufacturers could not compete under the code with garment workers of Puerto Rico.”\(^6\)

Recruiting workers into the ILGWU proved difficult, however, as employers launched a propaganda campaign to dissuade workers from joining the union, while the conditions of widespread homework complicated organizational efforts by decentralizing the workforce. Still, through the efforts of a number of ILGWU organizers and local activists, the union had recruited a number of workers from a few of the garment manufacturers by 1936.\(^7\) The first strike occurred in 1936 against the Dorothy Frocks Company for higher wages and union recognition. The San Antonio police quickly returned to the pattern of behavior developed during the cigar strikes, acting as armed escorts for strikebreakers while continually harassing strikers and threatening to deport those


\(^7\) There is quite a bit of disagreement as to who deserves the credit for organizing ILGWU locals in San Antonio. Blackwelder credits ILGWU organizer Rebecca Taylor, a San Antonio native, for recruiting garment workers, but a number of other activists and historians have cast doubt on Taylor’s activities. Emma Tenayuca and Maria Solis Sager, two prominent depression-era activists, claimed that Taylor was racist and condescending towards Mexican and Mexican American workers, and that she merely profited from the efforts of others in adding members to the ILGWU. While it is difficult to determine where exactly the truth lies in this situation, Taylor was conspicuous in her efforts to decry the pecan shellers strike as an action led entirely by Communists. See Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 135-136; Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights, 127-130; Manuela Solis Sager interviewed by Debra McDonald, Phyllis McKenzie, and Sarah Massey, Oral History Program, Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas.
who did not return to work.\textsuperscript{78} In an effort to continue production, the company shifted its operations to another factory. The strikers set up a picket around this new location, leading to a memorable confrontation in which fifty strikers surrounded and disrobed strikebreakers attempting to enter the facility.\textsuperscript{79} When that did not work, Dorothy Frocks simply shut down their San Antonio operations and moved to Dallas. The company returned to San Antonio a few months later and signed a union contract, but employment never reached pre-strike levels. A year later the ILGWU won another victory when the Shirlee Frocks Company agreed to raise wages to twenty cents an hour, which almost doubled previous wages but still lagged well behind NRA regulations.\textsuperscript{80}

These qualified victories brought newfound respect and notoriety to the ILGWU, with more workers seeking membership while other garment manufacturers sought to formulate plans to keep the union out of their factories. A typical response to these events came from the Texas Infant Manufacturing Company. They summarily fired any workers they suspected of ILGWU membership or sympathies, while also establishing a company-run union, the Council of Garment Workers, that all employees had to join. In response to these clear violations of the Wagner Act, the ILGWU lodged a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board in early 1938, demanding that the ILGWU members be rehired and that the Council of Garment Workers be dissolved. The NLRB ruled in favor of the union, but Texas Infant refused to abide by the ruling.

\textsuperscript{78} "San Antonio Garment Workers Serve Time in County Jail," \textit{Weekly Dispatch}, August 21, 1936.
\textsuperscript{79} Green, "ILGWU in Texas," 145.
\textsuperscript{80} Blackwelder, \textit{Women of the Depression}, 138-139.
As a result, the ILGWU declared a strike in March 1938. As with previous strikes, the company attempted to hold out through the use of strikebreakers, while the police harassed and arrested strikers when they were not acting as armed guards for Texas Infant Manufacturing. The company finally gave out under the pressure of the strike and a boycott effort. On the strength of this string of victories, the ILGWU continued to grow in San Antonio into the early 1940s, the only example of such success among Mexican and Mexican American workers in the region.\textsuperscript{81}

While the cigar and garment workers called attention to the brewing discontent among the workers of the West Side, it was the activities of the Workers Alliance that represented the most militant reaction to the conditions in San Antonio. The Workers Alliance was a national organization that sought to organize public works employees and the unemployed. The San Antonio council burst onto the scene during 1935 in the aftermath of the early cigar and garment strikes. “One of the very first issues at the Workers Alliance here was the right of workers to organize without fear of deportation,” according to Emma Tenayuca. “But the pressure of economic conditions moved faster in the direction of poverty. . . . The Workers Alliance gathered a tremendous momentum when the workers returned from the fields, not having worked, without money and without food.”\textsuperscript{82}

City officials responded fiercely to the activities of the Alliance. Tenayuca reported, “Scores . . . were herded before the United States Immigration office


\textsuperscript{82} Rips, “Living History,” 10.
and threatened with deportation merely for membership in the Workers Alliance,” including a number of U.S. citizens.\footnote{Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” \textit{The Communist} (March 1939), 262-263.}

By 1937 the Alliance turned its focus to public works employment. Tenayuca and other activists in the Alliance had conducted a number of letter-writing campaigns to WPA officials in Washington demanding expanded employment opportunities in San Antonio and the end to wage discrimination that allowed Anglos to earn more on public works projects than Mexican Americans.\footnote{Vargas, \textit{Labor Rights are Civil Rights}, 130.}

On June 29, 1937, however, the Workers Alliance staged a protest at the city’s WPA office after employment rolls had been slashed at the request of Texas farm interests. According to an Alliance sympathizer, “Realizing the need of large numbers of petitioners in order to command the attention of local officials, through them indicating to Federal authorities the necessity for further continuance of the WPA program, the San Antonio Workers Alliance, on June 29, 1937, sent a complaint committee of about one hundred men and women to the district WPA office to protest the discharge of over one thousand WPA workers in San Antonio.”\footnote{Cassie Jane Winfrey, “Gangster Police Methods Come to Texas,” no date, Box 2E189, Folder 5, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, UT-CAH.}

The local WPA director returned from lunch to find the delegation waiting for him. Rather than speak to them, however, he immediately called the police to remove them from the building. The police arrived and, using their over-sized nightsticks, drove the protestors out of the building. For his part, Mayor Quin immediately released a statement to the press declaring that the
Workers Alliance had engaged in a sit-down strike and that he approved of police actions in violently removing the protestors.  

A few hours later a squad of police appeared at the Workers Alliance headquarters on the West Side. Armed with axes and clubs made from the leaded ends of pool cues, they forced everyone out of the building, clubbing “everyone within reach.” After everyone had been forced out, the police then proceeded to systematically demolish everything within the office. A reporter for the San Antonio Light wrote, “Banners, flags, pictures, charters were ripped from the walls, torn into shreds and stomped on. . . . Benches and chairs were hammered to pieces. One officer of the law placed a typewriter on the floor and stomped on it. . . . A duplicating machine was demolished. The stove was kicked over and broken. A drawerful of dishes was found and officers broke them piece by piece.” The San Antonio News reported that “officers pounded out a tune on the piano, then turned it over and broke it.” Meanwhile, on the street outside police randomly attacked passersby: “Out in the street one man was struck in the legs with a nightstick, then arrested as he hobbled off because it was alleged he was not moving away fast enough. A woman was also arrested because she did not move fast enough.” Such an overwhelming show of force could only have been meant as a warning to the Workers Alliance and any prospective agitators that the

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87 “Use of Axes by Police Rapped,” San Antonio Light, June 30, 1937.
89 “Riots Follow Sit-In Strike at WPA; Police Do the Rest,” San Antonio News, June 30, 1937.
90 “Riots Follow Sit-In Strike at WPA; Police Do the Rest,” San Antonio News, June 30, 1937.
San Antonio Police would not hesitate to resort to violence (either systematic or random) when possible.

In the aftermath of this savage attack, Police Chief Kilday declared that he had found a large amount of literature, written in a foreign language (if Spanish can be considered a foreign language in San Antonio), that appeared, to his trained eye, to be "Communistic." These pamphlets provided all the proof Kilday and the machine needed to assert that the protests breaking out on the West Side were led by outside agitators, despite the fact that Tenayuca and the other leaders were San Antonio natives. Still, when Tenayuca's lawyer tried to secure her release from jail on a writ of habeas corpus, the judge bellowed back, "She belongs in jail. Let her stay there!" Since she was a "damned Communist," the judge declared that he did not care what the police did to her.

Despite the ferocity of this police attack, Tenayuca and the Workers Alliance continued to agitate on the West Side, especially among the workers of the city's largest employers: pecan shelling companies. In many ways, pecan shelling served as a perfect symbol of employment in San Antonio's West Side. Its workers suffered under horrific working conditions and earned the lowest factory wages in the nation. These low wages and plentiful labor supply allowed the pecan companies to maintain completely non-mechanized operations, while also providing massive profits for the operators. Within the atmosphere of the depression, however, with strikes breaking out in the other industries of the West

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Side, the pecan workers also launched a series of strikes between 1934 and the early 1940s.

Because of its location, San Antonio had been the leading center of pecan shelling for fifty years by the time of the Great Depression. Almost half of the national pecan crop was produced within a radius of a few hundred miles of the city. Since pecan shells made up more than half of the total weight of each pecan, it was cheaper to shell them in nearby San Antonio than to ship them elsewhere to be processed. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shelling was done by hand, but by the early 1920s the industry had begun to mechanize most of its operations. These machines graded and cracked the pecans. Workers then picked out the shells. San Antonio firms and their primary competition in St. Louis utilized these machines during the first years of the 1920s. 93

The industry changed drastically in 1926, however, with the formation of the Southern Pecan Shelling Company. Begun by Julius Seligmann and Joe Freeman with a $50,000 investment, Southern Pecan rapidly dominated the industry. 94 Rather than trying to keep up with the mechanized operations of the other pecan firms, Seligmann and Freeman, in the words of social scientist Harold Shapiro, "inverted the technological process." 95 Realizing the potential of the massive surplus labor pool available on the West Side, Southern employed only

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94 John Tedesco, "Freemans Linked to Labor Fight," San Antonio Express-News, November 7, 1999. Among other things, Joe Freeman has an arena, formerly the site of the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo, named after him. But Freeman remained a silent partner in Southern Pecan. Seligmann ran the day-to-day operations and was the sole face of the company in the ensuing strikes.
95 Shapiro, “Pecan Shellers of San Antonio,” 229.
hand labor from the beginning of operations in 1926, slashing their overhead costs.

They also instituted a contractor system. Through this arrangement, Southern Pecan sold unshelled pecans to contractors who hired the labor and provided work space. The contractor then sold the shelled pecans back to the company at a predetermined price. Since it held a virtual monopoly, Southern Pecan was able to dictate every aspect of the production process to these contractors. It set the prices and wages, and anyone who deviated from Southern Pecan dictates risked blacklisting. By the early 1930s, Southern Pecan operations stretched out over more than four hundred shelling sheds throughout the West Side as well as an unknown number of homes where families shelled pecans.

The contractor system gave Southern a number of advantages over its competitors. It did not need a large central factory, which limited overhead. Most importantly, however, by passing off issues of hiring and workplace management to contractors, the company rid itself of any need to worry about the consequences of low pay, long hours, and unhealthy working conditions. Even though the contractors remained little more than impoverished employees of Southern Pecan, the company could continually pass blame for the consequences of their business practices down the line to those who operated the shelling sheds. As a result, Southern Pecan rapidly out-competed its local and national

96 There is more than a passing resemblance between the practices of the sugar beet industry in the Upper Midwest during the 1920s and Southern Pecan in the 1930s. Both operations vertically integrated "agricultural" processes into a corporate structure, passing off the duties of employment to contractors restrained by the dictates of the company. And both relied on the migrant workers of South Texas.
competitors, and held an almost complete monopoly over San Antonio pecan shelling by the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{97}

At the onset of the Great Depression, Southern Pecan, through its network of contractors, was the largest employer on the West Side, employing between 10,000 and 20,000 shellers during the peak season each year.\textsuperscript{98} Only a fraction of this number worked during non-peak seasons. The seasonality of pecan shelling was not dictated by the perishability of pecans, however.\textsuperscript{99} Instead, labor needs determined the peak operating season for pecan shelling. During the winter months, when migrant farm workers returned to their off-season homes on the West Side, an enormous number of the seasonally unemployed resided near the pecan sheds, providing Southern Pecan with the largest possible pool of surplus labor at the lowest possible wages.

Pecan shelling and migrant farm work fed off each other. Pecan shelling wages acted as a subsidy for agricultural interests in other parts of the state and country, providing employment for migrant farmworkers between seasons. Conversely, sugar beet or cotton employment served as a subsidy to the pecan shelling industry, allowing it to continue paying minuscule wages. This linkage became especially important as the depression deepened and agricultural jobs became harder to find. In turn, the infinitesimal wages afforded by both pecan

\textsuperscript{97} Menefee and Cassmore, \textit{Pecan Shellers of San Antonio}, 8-9; Shapiro, "Pecan Shellers of San Antonio," 229; "Working Conditions of Pecan Shellers," 549-550.

\textsuperscript{98} Menefee and Cassmore, \textit{Pecan Shellers of San Antonio}, 5.

\textsuperscript{99} Southern Pecan proved this without a doubt in 1935 when Seligmann purchased almost the entire national surplus of the largest pecan crop in memory, 105,000,000 pounds, for a fraction of their normal cost. He then put the surplus in storage for a year. When the 1936 harvest yielded only 40,000,000 pounds, Seligmann sent his surplus nuts from the year before to smaller operators for twice what he had paid for them, making a profit of a half million dollars from his speculation. See Menefee and Cassmore, \textit{Pecan Shellers of San Antonio}, 8.
shelling and migrant farm work forced many Mexicans and Mexican Americans
to seek out what little relief, public or private, could be found in San Antonio.\textsuperscript{100} As a result, pecan shelling and migrant labor acted as a two-headed parasite that fed off of both local relief and the workers of San Antonio’s West Side, creating a self-sustaining cycle of falling wages and intensifying poverty despite rising profits for farmers and the pecan industry.

Pecan shelling provided necessary winter employment during the worst years of the Great Depression for most of these workers.\textsuperscript{101} As CIO organizer George Lambert recalled, “The pecan shelling industry wasn’t that important economically or any other way to San Antonio except that it provided the barest subsistence living to the migratory farm workers, who came in and shelled the pecans for Seligmann in the winter months.”\textsuperscript{102} In other words, the pecan industry was the deteriorating cornerstone of the poorly-constructed West Side labor market, barely holding up a rickety structure that threatened to come crashing down around its unfortunate inhabitants.

Pecan work was often an option of last resort, however. Pecan jobs were not sought after, but instead provided the least desirable, but necessary, employment to help West Siders get through the winter. The 10,000 to 20,000

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{101} A WPA study revealed that 17 percent of pecan shellers were San Antonio natives, a substantial majority came to San Antonio between 1911 and 1930, while only 10 percent came to the city during the 1930s. Most had spent several years working in the pecan industry. More than 40 percent first worked in pecan shelling before 1932, while only 11 percent first began pecan work after 1936. More than two-thirds of women surveyed stated that they only worked in the pecan industry, while less than one-third of men worked only in the pecan sheds. Among those that held employment other than pecan shelling, almost all were either unskilled construction workers or migrant agricultural laborers. Menefee and Cassmore, \textit{Pecan Shellers of San Antonio}, 3-5.
\textsuperscript{102} George Lambert interviewed by George Green, November 1971, Oral History Collection, Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas at Arlington.
\end{footnotesize}
workers in the shelling sheds at the peak of each season during the Great Depression was a product of nothing more than the abject economic desperation of many on the West Side. The pecan sheds offered the worst wages in the city, with most workers unable to earn any more than two dollars per week. In the four month period from September 1 to December 31, 1937, according to Social Security returns from Southern Pecan, regular employees received between $10.18 and $47.11. The highest earning employee averaged less than three dollars per week over that four-month period.\(^{103}\) Thus, pecan workers actually made less money in their urban jobs than they did as migrant farmworkers. Cotton pickers, for example, tended to make a dollar more per week than pecan shellers.\(^{104}\) Taking up the familiar refrain, the owner of a small pecan-shelling operation claimed that pecan wages were sufficient for Mexican workers: “The Mexicans don’t want much money. . . . Compared to those shanties they live in, the pecan shelleries are fine. They are glad to have a warm place to sit in the winter. They can be warm while they’re shelling pecans, they can talk to their friends while they’re working, their kids can come in after school and play because it’s better than going home. If they get hungry they can eat pecans.”\(^{105}\) Workers did not need subsistence wages, according to this shed owner, because they could stuff themselves with pecans while chatting with their friends.

One former sheller, who began working alongside her parents as a young girl, recalled that “conditions were very, very poor. When you get fifty, sixty

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\(^{103}\) J.R. Steelman to Miss Jay (?), March 15, 1938, File 530/47/24/6, RG 174, Department of Labor, USNA.  
^{105}\) Ibid., 50.
persons all in one place, you know, sitting side by side, sitting on wooden benches . . . and being there for eight hours, maybe nine [or] ten hours a day, that’s a bad situation. Of course, we had no sanitary conditions at all. . . . The majority were women. Later on as the depression progressed, men had to come in and sit next to the family to do the work. You take, for example, my father – I think that as a last resort he had to go in and shell pecans. He was a very proud man, but he had to leave his pride behind him and to go in there and sit next to us to earn a living because there was nothing else.”

Once they found themselves within the contractors’ sheds and began shelling, workers had to deal with a constant cloud of pecan dust that caused respiratory problems for many elderly workers. Their fingers often became swollen and infected after hours of handling broken shells each day. Even worse, basic standards of public health were impossible to maintain in these structures with poor ventilation and a complete lack of illumination or running water. For people who already lived in a disease-ridden environment like the West Side barrio, these additional health hazards at work only exacerbated an already horrible situation.

This long list of dangers and grievances continued to grow during the 1930s as Seligmann and Southern Pecan continually refused to raise wages. Throughout the depression Seligmann pronounced that he and the rest of the pecan industry wanted to pay higher wages, but competition and low profits made it impossible. He also carried this message into his dealings with the federal

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106 Alberta Snid interviewed by Maria Flores and Glenn Scott, no date, Oral History Collection, Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas at Arlington.
107 Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 104-105.
government. In August 1933 the National Pecan Shellers' Association, an industry group of which Southern Pecan was a member, agreed to abide by NRA regulations to raise weekly wages for workers to around $6.50, with an absolute ceiling at $12.00. The NRA code committee drew up regulations for a minimum wage of $11 per week for men and $7 for women. Furious at this agreement, Seligmann withdrew from the National Pecan Shellers' Association and formed the Southwestern Pecan Shellers Association, which demanded a separate code for southern pecan shellers, similar to the garment industry. At a meeting before the committee, Seligmann testified that "Mexican Pecan Shellers eat a good many pecans, and five cents a day is enough to support them in addition to what they eat while they work." The NRA code committee bowed to the pressure for lower wages (though not as low as Seligmann wanted) and created a new code with a minimum wage of fifteen cents per hour or six dollars per week, which would have tripled pay in San Antonio. When the code became effective in October 1934, however, Seligmann simply ignored it.

The first attempts to organize pecan workers predated Southern's refusal to abide by the NRA code, however. Two separate unions were formed in 1933. The first, El Nogal, was an independent union that claimed almost 4,000 members but did little during these years. The second, the Pecan Shelling Workers Union, was led by Magdaleno Rodriguez and bankrolled by Julius Seligmann in an effort to keep smaller pecan operations from undercutting Southern's wage

109 Quoted in George Lambert, "Jersey City of the South," July 4, 1938, Box 1, Folder 6, AR-36, Texas Labor Archives, UT-Arlington; "America's Lowest Paid Workers," no date, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA. Emphasis added.
110 Menefee and Cassmore, Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, 15-16.
111 Shapiro, "Pecan Shellers of San Antonio," 233.
scale. Thus, Rodriguez carried on a strange campaign of threatening to strike any employer that cut wages, while also demanding that employers not adopt the NRA code. He argued that NRA wages would force thousands of pecan shellers out of business, but it seems more likely that he was simply acting as a bludgeon against any employer who dared offer wages different than those mandated by Southern Pecan.112

Nevertheless, Rodriguez led the first pecan strike in July 1934 against shelling sheds not operated by Seligmann. These sheds had recently cut wages from six cents a pound for pecan halves and four cents for pieces down to four and a half and three and a half cents a pound. The strike lasted a few weeks before collapsing. The same union attempted a number of similar strikes the next year against a few small pecan operators who sought to cut wages, but again failed to achieve anything.113 Rodriguez claimed to represent more than ten thousand workers, but his union was little more than a one-man affair, and it faded away during the next few years, only to reemerge when Seligmann required Rodriguez’s obstructionist activities to check the growth of a more legitimate union in 1938.114

The industry remained quiet for the next few years until January 31, 1938, when Southern Pecan told their contractors to lower wages from six cents per

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112 Menefee and Cassmore, Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, 16-17; Shapiro, “Pecan Shellers of San Antonio,” 233.
113 Jamieson, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, 279.
114 Rodriguez appears throughout the primary and secondary evidence, but he remains a shadowy figure. The only positive depiction I have ever seen is from Ruben Mungúa, a labor supporter who ran a printing shop on the West Side. See Ruben Mungúa, The Nueceros Spoke (N.P.: 1982). See also Herbert Henderson to Senator Morris Sheppard, April 21, 1936, File 55854/100, RG 85, USNA.
pound for pieces and seven cents for halves down to five and six cents. This twenty percent wage cut caused a spontaneous walkout by more than six thousand shellers.\textsuperscript{115} Magdaleno Rodriguez’s old union, now rechristened the \textit{Union de Nueceros Unidos}, was briefly revived by Seligmann to try and end the strike, but failed to draw the strikers back to work. Rodriguez’s union remained on the scene, however, as a goon squad sent out by the pecan company to threaten strikers.\textsuperscript{116} The early leadership of this strike came from the veteran activists of the previous West Side strikes and the Workers Alliance, primarily women like Emma Tenayuca, Maria Solis Sager, and other local community leaders.\textsuperscript{117} A Department of Labor conciliator later stated, “At the time of the strike there were no real union leaders present so 3 Communists took charge.”\textsuperscript{118} Within a few days, however, Donald Henderson and the UCAPAWA arrived in San Antonio and took control of the strike as part of that union’s brief efforts to expand into Texas.\textsuperscript{119} They formed Pecan Workers Local No. 172 and demanded union recognition, collective bargaining rights, and the restoration of the pay cut until

\textsuperscript{115} J.R. Steelman to Miss Jay (?), March 15, 1938, File 530/47/24/6, RG 174, Department of Labor, USNA; Vargas, \textit{Labor Rights are Civil Rights}, 135.

\textsuperscript{116} See NLRB Official Report, Azar and Solomon vs. Pecan Workers Local No. 172, September 19, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA. The NLRB demanded that the contractor cease and desist from allowing Rodriguez to coerce employees to join his union on during business hours.

\textsuperscript{117} See Maria Solis Sager interview, Oral History Program, ITC; Emma Tenayuca interview, Oral History Program, ITC.

\textsuperscript{118} Conciliation Service Official Summary of Pecan Strike, April 13, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA. Tenayuca was, in fact, a member of the Communist Party, but many of the other local leaders were not.

\textsuperscript{119} See John Crossland interviewed by George Green, November 1971, Oral History Collection, Texas Labor Archives, UT-Arlington; George Lambert interview, Oral History Collection, UT-Arlington.
arbitrators could determine proper wage rates.\textsuperscript{120} While these were hardly revolutionary demands, Southern Pecan and the machine treated them as such.

The importance of this strike soon grew far beyond the efforts of previous years in the cigar and garment industries. What began as a spontaneous walkout over slashed pay rates soon morphed into a full-fledged social movement on the West Side that had repercussions that went far beyond considerations of wage levels in a single industry, even one so central to the community as pecan shelling. As CIO organizer George Lambert recalled, “It had at its inception taken on the aspect of a mass uprising among the Mexican-Americans in the entire West Side of San Antonio, and was being participated in actively by hundreds and perhaps thousands who didn’t themselves make a living in the pecan industry.”\textsuperscript{121} Sugar beet migrants and WPA workers, who formed a “middle class” among laborers on the West Side, worked as organizers and bodyguards throughout the strike.\textsuperscript{122} This community-wide support only grew during the length of the strike, as support committees, mass meetings, and picket lines multiplied throughout the barrio.

On the other side of this struggle, the city machine and Southern Pecan maintained a grim determination to use any measures necessary to crush the strike. Joseph Myers, Chief Labor Department Conciliator during the strike, noted, “The ring feels that if the pecan shellers are allowed to remain organized they would help to re-elect Maverick. . . . This will explain why the Chief of

\textsuperscript{120} Conciliation Service Official Summary of Pecan Strike, April 13, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
\textsuperscript{121} George Lambert interview, Oral History Collection, UT-Arlington.
\textsuperscript{122} George Lambert interview, Oral History Collection, UT-Arlington.
Police is determined to break up the union, and to publicly proclaim that there shall be no peaceful settlement of the strike. They have, apparently, enlisted the support of Immigration Inspector W.W. Knopp, who has declared his intention to deport all Mexicans not regularly admitted to this country, some 63 found and arrested on the picket lines." Chief of Police Kilday declared that he was attempting to stop a revolution, and under those circumstances any means were justified.

The pecan operators and the police could count on two unlikely allies in this struggle: the Mexican American middle class and the Archbishop of San Antonio. The Mexican Chamber of Commerce and LULAC were conspicuous in their opposition to the strike, just as they were a few years later in supporting the city machine against Maury Maverick. According to historian Richard Garcia, "It seems that the middle class did not want to be disturbed. During the 1934-38 period, when different sectors of the Mexican laboring class were striking, the life of the ricos and the upper middle class continued as usual. Labor strikes thus did not unify the Mexican community, they separated it." Likewise, Archbishop Arthur Drossaerts was an early opponent of the strike effort. In a congratulatory letter to Chief Kilday during the strike, he wrote, "Our police force has had a hard task of it these past three weeks. They fought, not the downtrodden sufferers of an egotistic capitalistic system, but the dangerous leadership trying to make hay

123 Joseph Myers to J.R. Steelman, February 12, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
124 Garcia, Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class, 107-108.
while the communistic sun was apparently appearing above our San Antonio horizon.”

Given the enormous gulf that lay between these forces, it is no surprise that the ensuing strike became quite contentious and violent. From the very beginning, Chief Kilday declared that there was no strike, and therefore the city did not have to allow any form of picketing, thereby performing an end-run around the First Amendment. A few days after the first walkout, he announced, “I am going to break up the picket lines this morning or any other morning the same situation arises, on the grounds that there is no strike.” Thus, the police and the city machine declared that all unrest came, not from any legitimate grievances, but from outside agitators seeking chaos as a means to their ultimate end of a communist takeover. Police arrested picketers surrounding the few shelling sheds attempting to continue operations during the strike, while also announcing that the pecan industry continued to operate as before. In all, more than a thousand were arrested and thrown into the Bexar County Jail.

The violence that occurred was almost entirely instigated by San Antonio’s law enforcement establishment. Special police were deputized and sent into the West Side to enter strikers’ homes and threaten them with arrest and

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125 “Archbishop Drossaerts Praises Police Fight on Communism,” San Antonio Express (February 19, 1938). As can be inferred from this quotation, Drossaerts did find conditions in the pecan shelling industry to be appalling, which the union used to its advantage. A number of UCAPAWA publications and statements featured his statement, “The Negro slaves before emancipation were a thousand times better off than these poor, defenseless people.” See George Lambert, “Jersey City of the Couth, July 4, 1938, Box 1, Folder 6, AR-36, UT-Arlington; “America’s Lowest Paid Workers,” no date, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, USNA. Years later, when asked about the use of Drossaerts’ statement, George Lambert said, “I believe this was sort of a tongue-in-cheek pickup.” Lambert interview, Oral History Collection UT-Arlington.

deportation if they did not return to work. Mass meetings, or even small crowds of people with no relation to the strike efforts, were tear-gassed. The city health department even rose from its long slumber to close down a soup kitchen frequented by strikers for health code violations. A riot then ensued when an angry crowd protesting the closure was dispersed with teargas and then randomly beaten by club-wielding police officers. Two days later, the *San Antonio Light*, which tended to be the most moderate of San Antonio’s daily newspapers, printed a front-page picture two weeks into the strike of an officer holding new, larger nightsticks, in what was clearly meant as a warning to the strikers, under the headline, “Police Get Clubby.”

Conciliator Joseph Myers remained in San Antonio throughout the strike and recorded the reign of terror as it occurred. As one of the only people in contact with both the strike leaders and city officials, he witnessed both sides of this struggle. On February 11, 1938, he reported that Kilday’s claims of Communist agitation were “[o]nly a subterfuge.” In addition, he declared, “Brutality of police beggars description” and “will ever remain a disgrace to this city.” Four days later he reported, “The Chief of Police very curtly informed” officials looking into the case “that any attempt to picket he would have his police use tear gas and clubs and break up any kind of picketing. City firemen have also been armed with clubs and made to aid the police.”

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127 “America’s Lowest Paid Workers,” no date, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, USNA.
129 Under the picture, the caption read, “R. DeBona is shown with some of the clubs, all two and one-half feet long and heavier than old clubs.” “Police Get Clubby,” *San Antonio Light* (February 14, 1938).
130 Joseph Myers to J.R. Steelman, February 11, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, USNA.
131 Joseph Myers to J.R. Steelman, February 15, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, USNA.
believe Kilday’s statements that he sought to put down a revolution, the lengths to which he and the police went to crush the strike effort, or any other signs of dissent on the West Side, seem to indicate that they truly believed they were fighting against an uprising that threatened to do more than bring higher wages and unionization in its wake. What is clear is that the police counterattacks did not derail the protest movement growing among the Mexicans and Mexican Americans of San Antonio, but instead seem to have imbued it with a radical determination to force change that only became more determined with each nightstick and tear gas attack.

During the second week of the strike, Governor James Allred attempted to force the two sides together to resolve the strike. He sent the State Industrial Commission to San Antonio to investigate the situation and report back to him. When the commission tried to convene on February 14, however, Mayor Quin refused to give the group any accommodations for their meeting. Finally, county officials allowed the group to meet in a room in the Bexar County Courthouse. For the next two days the commissioners heard testimony from a number of individuals on both sides of the strike. At the end of these hearings the Commission reported back to Allred that “wages are abnormally low, that living conditions are insupportable, and that no evidence has been adduced to justify police interference with police picketing.”

Despite the clear condemnation of the actions of Southern Pecan and the city government, however, strike efforts and police counterattacks continued through the end of February.

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132 Conciliation Service Official Summary of Pecan Strike, April 13, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
Finally, on March 9, both sides came together and agreed to submit the case to a board of arbitration, which ended picketing and the violence that came along with it. Southern Pecan would appoint one arbitrator, Local No. 172 would appoint a second, and the third would be an impartial arbitrator agreed to by both sides. Each side appointed their arbitrator, but Seligmann refused to agree to a third person for the arbitration board, in what seems to have been an attempt to hold up the proceedings and force the union’s hand. After almost a month of stalling the proceedings, however, Seligmann agreed to the final arbitrator and the board finally sat down on April 1 to investigate the situation. While the board collected information and prepared its decision, Seligmann, through Mayor Quin and Congressman Lyndon Johnson, agitated for relief subsidies from the Department of Agriculture for pecan companies, especially Southern Pecan, claiming that the strike and increased foreign competition threatened to destroy the industry. On April 13 the arbitrators released their report, stating that “the Pecan Industry in San Antonio is in a perilous plight, conditions are very bad, not only for the workers, but for the Operators and contractors.” They further decided that an immediate restoration of the wage cut would threaten the industry, so the board decided that wages would increase to 6.5 cents per pound for halves and 5.5 cents for pieces, effective for six months. Both sides accepted the decision, and Southern Pecan and the minor operators agreed to closed-shop

133 Stanley White to J.R. Steelman, March 29, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
134 Joseph Myers to J.R. Steelman, April 2, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
135 “Report of the Board of Arbitration in San Antonio Pecan Controversy,” April 13, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department of Labor, USNA.
136 “Decision of Board of Arbitration in San Antonio Pecan Strike,” April 13, 1938, Box 1, Folder 4, AR-36, UT-Arlington.
contracts effective until November 1, 1938. For the time being, it appeared that
the union had won a rousing victory.

The controversy was far from over, however. The passage of the Fair
Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938 complicated the situation by mandating a
national minimum wage of twenty-five cents. The pecan operators first tried to
get around this law by claiming that pecan shelling was agricultural employment,
and therefore exempt from federal labor law. Others claimed that their business
was entirely intrastate, and therefore did not fall under federal jurisdiction. When
these tactics did not work, Southern Pecan simply shut down the industry in late
October, 1938, while Seligmann went to Washington to lobby for exemption from
the wage and hour provisions of the FLSA. When pecan shelling began again a
few weeks later, most of the shelling sheds never reopened and the operators
instituted a “stretch-out” that forced workers to shell an amount well beyond the
ability of most employed in the sheds. As this slow process of weeding out
workers continued, Southern Pecan persisted in its efforts to gain an exemption
from the minimum wage while planning to re-mechanize the industry more than a
decade after they had reverted to hand shelling. By 1940, the pecan workforce
had shrunk to a fraction of its peak in the 1930s even as the union maintained a
hold on the newly mechanized facilities of Southern Pecan.

137 Menefee and Cassmore, Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, 18.
138 George Lambert open letter, November 1, 1938, File 199/1189, Box 472, RG 280, Department
of Labor, USNA.
139 Conciliation Service Report on Threatened Strike, May 20, 1939, File 199/3673, Box 536, RG
280, Department of Labor, USNA.
140 A thorough examination of Southern Pecan’s efforts to gain exemption from the FLSA can be
found in the 23-page report prepared by the Wage and Hour Division of the Department of Labor
in 1939. Merle D. Vincent, January 23, 1939, Box 2E189, Folder 15, Labor Movement in Texas
Collection, UT-CAH.
In the end, then, it could be said that, at best, the pecan shellers won a pyrrhic victory. A few years later, economist Frederic Meyers noted that the catastrophic effects on business that some had predicted would result from the Fair Labor Standards Act had not occurred. He wrote that “some ‘straggler’ enterprises are forced out of existence, and some employees find themselves without jobs, although, actually, few cases of reduced employment in industries affected most by the act have been found.”¹⁴¹ In a footnote below this statement, however, Meyers noted, “The only major case of unemployment that has come to the attention of this author was the pecan-shelling industry, in which the increased wage from prevailing levels of under $0.10 per hour resulted in the utilization of already existing mechanical techniques for shelling pecans and the displacement of a very large part of the labor force.”¹⁴² Once again, the Mexican and Mexican American workers of South Texas found themselves victims, whether intentionally or not, of New Deal legislation meant to ameliorate their situation. With their union now a hollow shell, especially for those no longer employed in pecan shelling, and the emergent social movement on the West Side dissolved, little seemed to have changed by the early 1940s. The reformist tendencies that emerged around the strike effort helped defeat the city machine in the 1939 mayoral election, but two years later that victory also disappeared. For those who had previously depended on pecan shelling for subsistence, some could find employment at Finck Cigar, which claimed no interstate business and therefore

did not have to pay the minimum wage, while others had no choice but to return to the migran t stream.¹⁴³

These changes in pecan shelling, like the other commercial activities in South Texas that depended on cheap labor and low overhead costs, point toward a few important conclusions. One is the lack of a clear line dividing these urban processing operations from agricultural fieldwork. While a clear delineation between agricultural and non-agricultural employment runs through labor law, the actual conditions of pecan shelling, shrimp hulling, and vegetable canning evince little difference from the conditions of agricultural labor. Seasonal unemployment, low wages, and a dependence on agricultural wages during part of the year by many of the factory workers in South Texas belied the simplistic dichotomy of agricultural and non-agricultural labor. But this reality points toward a more important point, made clearer by corporate decentralization in recent decades. While industrial processes have always been depicted as constant and eternal with impulses toward growth and increased sophistication, pecan shelling (as well as the more recent establishment of less technologically advanced factories overseas to take advantage of cheaper labor) reveals the illusion of the permanence of industry and mechanization. The de-mechanization and re-mechanization of Southern Pecan simply served as an early example of the contingent nature of technology within the capitalist system.

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¹⁴³ Shapiro, “Pecan Shellers of San Antonio,” 243. Menefee and Cassmore reported that a large number of former pecan shellers left for sugar beet work in 1939 intent on not returning to San Antonio. Menefee and Cassmore, Pecan Shellers of San Antonio, 58.
The experience of the Great Depression in South Texas differed in important ways from other parts of the United States. Most obviously, the deportation and repatriation drives affected South Texas more profoundly than any other region during the early years of the Depression. Beyond this obvious difference, however, there lay a series of more subtle, but equally important, variations unique to South Texas that had enormous ramifications on everyday life in the region. The migrant labor stream that had begun and ended in South Texas for decades now confronted a series of new pressures brought on by the Dust Bowl migration, reduced agricultural prices, threats of deportation, and a number of other factors that made the already unstable life of seasonal farm laborers even more unpredictable. These stresses produced an increasing urbanization of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who sought the relative safety against deportation provided by a place like the West Side of San Antonio. The lack of any established system of public relief then fell hard on the shoulders of Mexicans and Mexican Americans already reeling from the economic pressures of the depression. At the same time, the hundreds of thousands who left South Texas for Mexico during the depression also helped accelerate a trend toward the formation of a native-born middle class that introduced a more pronounced class cleavage into these communities.

The results of all of these intense pressures looked very different from those endured by the working class in other parts of the United States. Lizabeth Cohen’s landmark study of the Chicago working class, for instance, described a subtle process of change during the 1920s and 1930s that culminated in the
increased political participation and sense of class consciousness of the union
drives during the mid-1930s. A common mass culture, a sense of betrayal at the
collapse of the welfare capitalist schemes of the 1920s, and the struggle for
subsistence created by the economic collapse helped erase divisions based on
ethnicity and skill.\textsuperscript{144} There were no developments in San Antonio or South
Texas parallel to Cohen's depiction of Depression-era Chicago, however.
Instead, the already rigid lines of ethnicity and class only seemed to harden in
South Texas, as Anglos chose to look away from the conditions in Tejano
communities, and the Mexican American middle class sought to distance itself
from the immigrants and workers that made up the majority of their
community.\textsuperscript{145}

Standing at the beginning of the 1940s, the situation of the workers in San
Antonio and South Texas must have looked very similar to the way in which they
began the era of the Great Depression. Segregation still held sway in labor and
social relations. Migrant agricultural labor remained the economic mainstay of
the Mexican and Mexican American communities. Violence lurked just below of
the surface of these relations, though primarily as an unspoken threat rather than a
regularly-practiced mode of coercion. Beyond these surface similarities,

\textsuperscript{144} Cohen, Making a New Deal.
\textsuperscript{145} The closest analogue would seem to come from California, especially the rural areas stalked by
the fascistic presence of the United Farmers. Mexicans and Mexican Americans faced the threats
of deportation (though many fewer were actually deported), they confronted constant racism, and
the specter of violence hovered over effort they made to improve their living conditions. While
these conditions created a similar environment as South Texas, California lacked the
overwhelming tradition of violence against Mexicans that hung over all social relations in South
Texas, where the massacres of 1915-1916 still lived in the memory of many long-time residents.
See Weber, Dark Sweat, White Gold.
however, the events of the late 1920s and 1930s had substantially altered the realities of life for many in South Texas.

National scapegoating of Mexicans as parasites that caused the Great Depression continued throughout the 1930s. The resulting deportation and repatriation campaigns that targeted the Mexican and Mexican American communities made a mockery of the rights of citizenship, while the intensification of the web of labor controls did the same for workers' rights. When Mexicans and Mexican Americans attempted to overcome these handicaps through organization and unionization, they confronted the overwhelming power of employers, law enforcement, and vigilantes united to crush anything that smacked of pleas for improved wages or working conditions. Thus, if at the end of the Depression conditions looked the same as before the economic collapse, these similarities hid a number of scars that had developed over the previous decade. While strikers and activists attempted to change the rigid political and racial structures of South Texas during the Depression, their failures resonated for decades to come. Unionization efforts disappeared among South Texas Mexicans and Mexican Americans until the farm worker strikes of the 1960s, while efforts for political reform and civil rights protection moved into the more genteel arena of middle class protest movements led by LULAC and the G.I. Forum.146

If the nation as a whole crawled out of the depths of the Depression with the beginning of World War II, the Mexicans and Mexican Americans of South

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146 The exception was the continued presence of the ILGWU in San Antonio, which actually carried on a strike that lasted for several years in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See International Ladies Garment Workers Union Local 180 Collection, AR-30, Texas Labor Archive, University of Texas at Arlington.
Texas had a more difficult path to recovery. While their struggle for full citizenship began with World War II, it would be many years before it would come to fruition. In the meantime, they watched as the war effort helped spread the labor relations of South Texas to the rest of the nation in a way that went well beyond the efforts of northern agricultural and industrial interests in the 1920s to recruit Mexicans and Mexican Americans.
Chapter 9: Texas is Everywhere South of the Canadian Border: The Bracero Program and the Nationalization of South Texas Labor Relations

"Throughout the southwest, from California to Arkansas, a substitute form of industrial relations was being worked out. Its characteristics were the negotiation of labor contracts by diplomats, the determination of wages by administrative discretion, the abandonment of the constitutional rights of the Mexican migrants in exchange for treaty rights of a lower order, the nullification of the right of administrative appeal of American citizens, and the enforcement of contractual rights, duties and obligations by one of the parties to a contract. The fact that these unusual procedures were being tried out on an unorganized mass of alien laborers; that the United States Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, could put themselves up as business agents, mediators, negotiators, shop stewards and enforcers in a managed labor market - these things did not greatly disturb the house of labor, appearing, as they did, quaint rather than ominous."

Ernesto Galarza

"I know that we can bring ten thousand Tipica Orchestras here and send five thousand Rotary Clubs and Kiwanis Clubs and other good will delegations into Mexico, yet so long as the Mexican knows that he may be killed with impunity by any American who chooses to kill him, then all our talk about being good neighbors is merely paying lip service to a friendship we both know is a joke... Our present Good Neighbor policy with Mexico has nothing of the spontaneous and the warm-hearted about it. Our present policy is one of pure expediency, forced upon our state and our governor when Mexico refused to let her laborers come here during the war because we discriminated against Mexicans."

Hart Stilwell

In February 1952 Clifford Parliman, absentee farmowner and self-described "industrial engineer" from Edinburg (Hidalgo County), wrote to Texas Governor Allen Shivers with a simple request: "It would seem the time has come where we people of this great State of Texas should begin to seek ways and means to get out from under the yoke of the United States, so that we may operate independently." What great injustice had caused Parliman to make this radical suggestion? "The U.S. Congress and Senate enacted a law controlling our migratory Mexican labor," wrote Parliman, "which law perpetrated a terrible injustice upon the border farmers." Having apparently forgotten about the Civil

2 Hart Stilwell, "Good Neighbors and Band Music," Texas Spectator (October 11, 1946), 3.
War, and using the royal “we,” he suggested, “We have had a belief that Texas came into the union under terms wherein we could again take up our independence if it were un-economical for us to remain as a State of the Union.” He concluded his argument to the governor by arguing, “Texas could, as an independent territory, place an export tax upon gas and oil and other products that should give revenue for operating and maintaining a standing Army. With this independence we could make our own laws as to how we wish to handle Mexican labor and you and I know Texans could make laws with Mexicans that would not be unfair but which could and would be closely observed. In other words we understand the Mexicans and they understand us, hence could draw better laws by far than the Yankees who do not understand the Mexicans, could draw for us.”

Despite this complaint that the labor agreement between the United States and Mexico known as the Bracero Program justified secession from the union, Parliman proceeded to contract eight braceros for his Hidalgo County cotton farm in March 1952, one month after his letter to Shivers. These workers fulfilled their contract and returned to Mexico with no complaints from Parliman. In June of that same year he contracted for eight more. After less than a month Parliman complained to the local office of the United States Employment Service (USES) that these braceros had drunkenly damaged irrigation pipes and other items on his property. He demanded that the federal agency cancel his contracts immediately, releasing him from the need to pay off the remainder of the money he owed them. The local field representative of the USES found no corroborating evidence of

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any destruction caused by the braceros and refused to release Parliman from his contractual obligations. Instead, it became clear that Parliman had contracted too many workers and refused to allow the braceros to work the minimum number of hours stipulated in their contract. Desperate, Parliman took the issue to the local court system. After two weeks in prison waiting for their trial, each of the braceros was found not guilty for lack of evidence by South Texas juries, which were not known for concern for the civil rights of Mexicans or Mexican Americans.4 A friend and associate of Parliman complained that this episode proved that “Unless these contracts in respect to the farmer and worker are changed, and changed immediately, then they perpetrate a tremendous injustice against the farmer, give the whip hand to the common uneducated farmhand and deny the farmer any right of control, similar to the Russian system behind the Iron Curtain and they definitely demand severe penalties be paid by the farmer if he attempts to exert control of his men and discharge the unruly ones.”5

In many ways the complaints raised by Clifford Parliman against the bracero program at the same time he utilized it as a supply of cheap foreign labor are a perfect microcosm of the contentious relationship between South Texas agricultural interests and the bracero program. For more than two decades, growers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and other areas of South Texas never stopped complaining about what they deemed the unfair restrictions of the

4 In fact, a landmark Supreme Court case, *Pete Hernández v State of Texas* (347 U.S. 475), in which the court found that the systematic exclusion of Latinos from juries in Texas was unconstitutional, came from South Texas. See Ruben Munguía, “A Cotton Picker Finds Justice,” June 1954; Gus Garcia to Manuel Tello, March 15, 1955, Box 1, Folder 1, Gus Garcia Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

program at the same time that the state of Texas contracted more braceros than any other state. While these complaints did not tend to go quite as far as Parsons' demands for immediate secession, they all evinced a palpable anger over government regulation of Mexican labor migration. Nevertheless, their fury did not stop them from hiring much of their labor force through the binational contract labor scheme.

Hidden by this gnashing of teeth and public displays of righteous indignation was the Lone Star heritage of the Bracero Program. The gradual dissipation of the Great Depression and the specter of war led the growers of South Texas, along with their compatriots in California and Arizona, to demand that the federal government allow them to contract seasonal labor from Mexico. These cries in 1940 and 1941 differed little from their requests in 1936 (see Chapter 7), but the entry of the United States into World War II at the end of 1941 provided the excuse for putting their pre-war demands into effect. The program that emerged in 1942 from the negotiations between the governments of the US and Mexico was much different from the wholly unregulated recruitment scheme desired by the growers of South Texas, not least because Mexico refused to place its citizens in Texas until the chronic discrimination suffered by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in that state had been substantially reduced.

Despite the efforts of the Mexican government to protect its citizens through the protections of the Bracero Program, however, over the course of more than two decades the contract labor scheme evolved beyond its control. As the U.S. government wrested control away from the Mexican government and
Southwestern agricultural interests got their hands on the Bracero Program, the South Texas model of labor relations gradually spread to the rest of the nation. Despite the restrictions written into the initial agreement, it developed into a source for foreign, surplus labor that lacked the basic free labor rights of mobility and negotiation. Further, at almost every step of the evolution of the Bracero Program from 1942-1964, Texas remained central: as an obstacle to binational agreements, as a voracious exploiter of contract labor after the blacklist expired, and, when Texas growers turned to mechanization rather than pay the minimum bracero wage, as the primary cause of the death of the contract labor scheme.  

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In 1940 Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace testified before a Senate committee that as a result of mechanization and technological advancement on the nation’s farms there was a glut of agricultural labor. He claimed that the agricultural economy required 1,600,000 fewer workers than it had a decade earlier. One year later, in 1941, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics published a report claiming that 1.5 million workers could leave agriculture without threatening the nation’s agricultural output. Despite these assertions that the end
of the Great Depression and the recovery of the nation's industrial economy did
not threaten the existence of an agricultural labor force, however, growers
throughout the nation complained that they found themselves in a dire situation
which could only be solved by the importation of workers from Mexico.

Throughout 1940 and 1941 the growers of South Texas fretted that
Mexican American workers had abandoned their fields permanently for the lure
of higher wages further north. Some sought to deal with this problem with more
stringent enforcement of the Emigrant Agency Law of 1929.9 Most demanded, as
they had in 1936, that the federal government eliminate the immigration
regulations that excluded the entry of illiterates and contract laborers. In effect,
they demanded an open border and the right to take as many workers as they
pleased out of Mexico. Agribusiness interests and their adjuncts in the state
government pleaded for the Texas contingents in the US House and Senate to
introduce legislation creating a contracting system similar to the one established
during World War I.10 Growers from California and Arizona soon joined in these
demands for an open border for labor.11

The Department of Agriculture denied that a shortage of farm labor
existed, while President Roosevelt reminded the congressmen from Texas that the

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9 Otey M. Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," Agricultural
History 34 (July 1960), 140-141.
10 Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement," 140-141; Vargas, Labor Rights
are Civil Rights, 238-239.
11 Scruggs, "Evolution of Mexican Farm Labor Agreement," 141. The California State Federation
of Labor sent a telegram to Governor Culbert Olson in August 1941 complaining that requests by
agricultural and railroad interests in the state for 30,000 Mexican workers were unnecessary as an
investigation "reveals no acute shortage of this class of workers but only reason jobs are not filled
is the inadequate rates of pay which range in the western states from 36 cents to 43 cents per
hour." California State Federation of Labor to Culbert Olson, August 29, 1941, Series 5, Carton
39, Folder 13, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
Texas Farm Placement Service had been established a decade earlier to assist in alleviating labor shortages. But any argument over whether there was or was not a shortage of labor during 1940-1941 is irrelevant. The salient point is that growers had come to rely on an overflowing labor pool for so long that they recognized any decrease in the supply of available workers as a catastrophic shortage. For the growers of South Texas these beliefs went back to the very beginning of large-scale agricultural growth around the turn of the century, when they declared an inalienable right to Mexican immigrant labor that coincided quite conveniently with their equally fervent desire to continually slash wage rates. In the end, it is this desire to maintain a surplus labor pool as a protection against higher labor costs that motivated calls for the lifting of immigration restrictions from Mexico. Notions of labor shortage were entirely impressionistic, mouthed piously by farming interests transfixed by federal agricultural subsidies that seemed certain with the expansion of war in Europe. Pearl Harbor and the US entry into the war only added to the formidable artillery at the command of lobbyists and politicians seeking to grant farm interests their desired foreign labor supply. Early in 1942 the US government moved forcefully to appease growers’ desires for Mexican labor.

Meanwhile, Mexico continued to suffer under the weight of economic crisis and instability. Industrial and agricultural output grew substantially in the early 1940s, and the Cardenista land reforms temporarily blunted the agrarian

12 Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights, 240.
13 Cindy Hahamovitch, manuscript in progress, 2008, Chapter 1, 11.
radicalism that had plagued rural areas since the revolutionary era, but the capital-intensive nature of economic growth in each sector only exacerbated the class stratification of the rural majority. Mexican agricultural output grew at an annual rate of 6.3 percent from 1940-1960, which was among the highest rates in the world, but the benefits of this growth did not trickle down to the small landowners, ejidatarios, or farm laborers.\footnote{Harry E. Cross and James A. Sandos, \textit{Across the Border: Rural Development in Mexico and Recent Migration to the United States} (Berkeley: University of California Institute of Governmental Studies, 1981), 18.} Instead, in the words of scholar Roger Bartra, the "development of Mexican agriculture since the Cardenista years of agrarian reform has been characterized by the rise of a powerful sector of capitalist farmers situated in the middle of a sea of semi-proletarianized and pauperized peasants and of landless day laborers."\footnote{Roger Bartra, \textit{Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 38.} Small farmers, including many communal farmers or ejidatarios, found themselves unable to compete with the irrigated agribusiness enterprises produced by Mexico's Green Revolution. Many looked to migration and wage labor as the only means of subsistence.

The vast majority of these migrants did not look to the United States, but instead to the growing urban areas of Mexico, especially Mexico City.\footnote{In part because of this increased internal migration and the underemployment that came along with it, wage levels in Mexico City plummeted during these years. From an index of 100 in 1938 real wages in Mexico City fell to a low of 46.6 in 1947, and did not regain the 1938 levels until 1971. Cited in Stephen R. Niblo, \textit{Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption} (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Press, 1999), 4.} For a substantial minority of migrants, however, the burgeoning wartime economy north of the Rio Grande created a powerful justification for international migration. Thus, as Harry Cross and James Sandos argued, altering Eyler Simpson's classic formulation of agrarian reform, "Migration, not the ejido,
proved to be Mexico's 'way out' of its development crisis of the mid-twentieth century.  

As with previous eras, it is impossible to state with any certainty the number of people crossing the US-Mexico border from 1940-1941, but large numbers resumed the northward migrations that had all but stopped during the depths of the Great Depression. This resumption of emigration to the United States forced the Mexican government to face the same problem it had in the 1920s. How could policymakers turn this out-migration to the advantage of the Mexican state and nation without entirely discarding the artifice of protective, if defensive, nationalism?

Shortly after the official entry of the United States into World War II in December 1941 the two nations began negotiations for the construction of a binational contract labor program. The growers who demanded access to Mexican workers had no intention of letting either government dictate the terms by which this access was granted, but the unilateral contracting of labor from south of the border that had been acceptable during World War I was not diplomatically possible in the context of World War II and the Good Neighbor Policy.  

For its part, the Mexican government remained wary of allowing its citizens to work in the United States, remembering the humanitarian crises created when Mexicans found themselves stranded and destitute in the United States.

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19 Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," 143-144. Refusals to act unilaterally by the US government would end around the same time as the war—the remainder of the bracero program witnessed frequent efforts by the US to force Mexico's hand by unilaterally contracting laborers at the border.
during the brief economic downturn in the early 1920s and the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Mexican policymakers also worried that an increased migration of Mexicans to the United States would only multiply the instances of discrimination and violence against Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout the United States, but especially in Texas. In the end, according to historian Richard Craig, "Mexico acquiesced to the bracero program because its advantages far outweighed its disadvantages."\(^{20}\) The Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations put a patriotic spin on it: "The immigration of braceros can be considered as one of the ways in which Mexico aided the effort of the Allied Nations for total victory, despite negative effects on production in Mexico, by helping sustain levels of production in the United States as necessary in the war."\(^{21}\)

The result was the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, originally meant as a temporary mechanism for solving the supposed agricultural labor shortage in the U.S. The agreement drawn up between the two governments allowed for contracting of agricultural laborers in Mexico by the US government, which then subcontracted to US farming interests. The agreement came with a few important restrictions that the Mexican government hoped would guarantee fair wages and treatment for its citizens abroad. First, the agreement stated that Mexican workers could not be used to displace native workers. Second, braceros were guaranteed the prevailing wage in the area for which they were contracted,

\(^{20}\) Craig, *Bracero Program*, 23.
with a thirty-cent minimum wage, as well as suitable housing and food.\textsuperscript{22} Third, any signs of discrimination by employers would result in cancellation of their contracts. Chronic discrimination in any town or region would lead to unilateral blacklisting by the Mexican government. As a result of this provision, officials in Mexico City refused to allow braceros into the state of Texas throughout the wartime program. Finally, any grower that employed undocumented Mexican workers would not be allowed to contract braceros.

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Despite the blacklisting of Texas, wartime conditions in the state were important for the operations of the Bracero Program. The circumstances of widespread discrimination, biased draft practices that sent Mexican Americans into the military in numbers that far outweighed their percentage of the population, pervasive and unapologetic employment of undocumented Mexican laborers by the region's growers, and the state government's efforts to have Texas removed from Mexico's bracero blacklist all had a profound effect on the workings of the international labor agreement during the war. The ways in which these different strands of social and labor relations came together in South Texas in these years dictated not only how the original wartime program operated, but also proved pivotal in the evolution of the program in the post-war years.

\textsuperscript{22} Growers especially disliked this prevailing wage clause, which they feared would eliminate their entire reason for demanding Mexican labor in the first place: the desire to keep wages from rising. For the first few months of the program many of the worst fears of the growers seemed to be coming true under the jurisdiction of the Farm Security Administration which tried to extend some of the guarantees of the bracero program to domestic farmworkers. These efforts to finally extend the New Deal to agricultural labor led to a fierce backlash from farming interests that led to the shifting of supervision of the program from the Farm Security Administration to the War Food Administration, which growers considered a much more reliable ally in their fight to keep their workers from gaining the rights secured by industrial workers during the previous decade. See Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 20-22.
The most obvious and visible aspect of wartime conditions in Texas, at least from the point of view of Mexico, was the continued segregation and discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While these conditions had a long and well-documented history before the outbreak of World War II, added scrutiny from Mexico, the federal government, and an energized Mexican American civil rights movement helped turn these instances of discrimination into episodes of national and international importance. The constant empty recitations by politicians and community leaders in Texas of the ideals of the good neighbor policy only made these shortcomings that much more glaring.

At its most brutal, this racial system still held the potential for violence, even if Texas witnessed no single episode like the 1942 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. Hart Stilwell noted in 1946 that, "if an Anglo-American has served one day in the penitentiary [in Texas] for the killing of a Latin-American during [the previous twenty-five years], I have not heard of it." Further, he asserted, "It may be accepted as an established fact in Texas that an Anglo-American can kill a Latin-American with impunity. The day has passed when the Anglo-American received a bounty for such an act, and the day has passed, in most of Texas, when the killing of Latin-Americans was considered a sport." Needless to say, Mexicans and Mexican Americans probably failed to view this as substantial progress.

Two instances of violence that briefly drew the focus of the Mexican government occurred in the town of Runge, Karnes County, south of San Antonio. The first, in early 1942, involved a man named Candelario de la Rosa who had purchased a used truck from Ellis Sistrunk, a Deputy Sheriff. The truck broke down shortly after De la Rosa bought it. Since he was unable to find field work in Karnes County, he failed to make a payment owed to Sistrunk. When De la Rosa went with his sixteen-year-old son to explain his situation to Sistrunk, the Deputy Sheriff immediately grabbed a lead pipe and pummeled De la Rosa in the head, bursting his left ear drum and causing profuse bleeding. Then in March 1943, in a completely unrelated incident, a teenage girl named Frances Martinez approached Sistrunk at his office to ask why he had arrested her father. He refused to give her an answer, then followed her out into the street and, in full view of a crowd on the street, punched her in the face repeatedly and threw her up against a brick wall. 25

To quiet the outcry that followed these incidents, the state sent Gully Cowsert, a Texas Ranger, who reported that neither De la Rosa nor Martinez wished to press charges against Sistrunk and that both episodes had merely been misunderstandings. 26 Not surprisingly, both De la Rosa and Martinez soon told very different stories. De la Rosa recalled that the Karnes County Sheriff and Ranger Cowsert came to him and told him that “if I wanted to press the case I would have to go to Runge and I knew that it was useless for the case to be tried

25 Manuel C. Gonzalez to George Sanchez, April 28, 1943, Casefile 50-76-3, Frames 695-696, Reel 12, Department of Justice Peonage Files, 1901-1945 (microfilm).
26 Gully Cowsert report, April 1943, Casefile 50-76-3, Frames 699-700, Reel 12, DOJ Peonage Files.
in Runge where the only law that prevails is Sistrunk. . . . The Sheriff then presented a paper to us which he asked me to sign, but I do no know what it was. . . . Even now I don't know what is the status of the case which I have had pending for more than 14 months against the Deputy Sheriff.”

Likewise, Frances Martinez claimed that the Ranger had tried to dissuade her from filing charges against Sistrunk. In describing these two cases in a letter to the Karnes County Judge, the Mexican Consul General in San Antonio echoed Stilwell’s feelings on the fear created by continued racial violence in South Texas and its effects on the ideal of the good neighbor: “Please believe me, that this letter is written in a spirit of cooperation, as a representative of a country which is allied to the United States in a mortal struggle for the preservation of democratic rights, for the protection of the dignity of man, and especially adhering to President Roosevelt’s four principles of the Atlantic Charter and especially the one that refers to ‘Freedom from fear.’”

Less dangerous, though no less galling for the Mexican government and the Mexican and Mexican American populations in South Texas, was the continuation of segregation in education and public accommodations. Longtime civil rights activist Alonso Perales testified before Congress that he had a list of 150 towns and cities in Texas “where there exist from 1 to 10 public places of business and amusement, where Mexicans are denied service, or entrance,” leading him to declare that the “discriminatory situation in Texas is truly a

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27 Testimony of Candelario de la Rosa, May 6, 1943, Casefile 50-76-3, Frame 705, Reel 12, DOJ Peonage Files.
28 Carlos Palacios Roji to S.B. Carr, May 7, 1943, Casefile 50-76-3, Frames 702-704, Reel 12, DOJ Peonage Files.
disgrace to our Nation.” The Mexican Consulates in Texas published a seemingly never-ending series of updates on discriminatory actions throughout the state to justify its refusal to send braceros to Texas, publicizing acts of residential segregation and violence against Mexicans moving to Anglo neighborhoods, school segregation, police misconduct against Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and dozens of other instances of racial discrimination. The most shocking actions detailed in these reports include the indiscriminate machine-gunning of a Mexican family by the Sheriff of Bee County and the fire-bombing by Anglos of a house in the Mayfield Park section of San Antonio recently purchased by a Mexican American family. The state of Texas made token efforts to deal with these issues, but rarely moved beyond expressions of feigned horror at press conferences.

The officials who looked the other way when violence threatened Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas were more than happy to recruit and draft these same Mexican Americans into the ongoing war effort. As Zaragoza Vargas has argued, “Tejanos fell victim to the all-white local draft boards, microcosms of inordinate Anglo political power and authority, bigotry, and cultural customs.” Even those who worked as farm laborers, which made them eligible for the same deferments as essential industrial workers, found

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30 See File 1989/59-19, Good Neighbor Commission Collection, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.
31 The state government did establish the Good Neighbor Commission, as will be discussed at length below, but this was never more than a public relations agency that tried to muffle publicity of discrimination rather than eliminate it.
32 Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights, 208.
themselves pushed into the military. Presumably, the draft boards knew that farmers would find their workforce south of the Rio Grande when Mexican American farmworkers entered the military. As a result, Mexican Americans made up a disproportionate percentage of the infantry during World War II and died in much higher numbers than Texas Anglos. In 1944 Alonso Perales wrote to Congressman Paul Kilday (brother of San Antonio chief of police) asking that he “ascertain from our War Department why it is that from fifty per cent to seventy-five per cent of the casualties from South Texas are soldiers of Mexican descent.” He continued, stressing that “we are quite proud of the opportunity afforded us to defend our country on the firing line, but we want to ascertain for sure whether the circumstances that fifty to seventy-five per cent of the casualties from South Texas are of Mexican descent is due to the fact that there are not sufficient soldiers of other extractions in South Texas to defend our country on the battle fields, or whether it is because some individuals who are prejudiced against the Mexican people are rushing our boys to the battle fronts in order that they may be the first to get killed and get rid of them that way.”

The state of Texas finally reacted to these protests against chronic discrimination in 1943, but not because of any pangs of conscience but because it

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33 Both the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 and the Tydings Amendment of 1942 provided deferments for agricultural laborers in essential crops. Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program*, 19; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 208. This fact did not stop a member of the Selective Service Board in Edinburg from complaining that out-of-state recruitment of farm laborers was threatening both the economy of the Valley and its capacity to draft sufficient numbers of soldiers. In the end, this complaint appears to be little more than a slight variation on the older fretting about labor contractors jeopardizing the economy of South Texas by sending workers north to the sugar beet fields, with the war effort stirred in as a half-hearted patriotic justification for the immobilization of workers. O.W. Curry, May 8, 1942, Casefile 50-74-5, Frames 567-569, Reel 12, DOJ Peonage Files.

34 Reproduced in Perales, *Are We Good Neighbors?*, 283-284.
was under pressure to break Mexico’s blacklist. The first attempt to convince Mexico to reconsider its position was the passage of the “Caucasian Race Resolution” by the state legislature, which banned discrimination against “Caucasians” (which legally included Mexicans and Mexican Americans) in public accommodations. As historian George Green noted, this resolution implied “that it was all right with the state if discrimination against black Texans continued unabated.”

Governor Coke Stevenson next wrote to the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations, Ezequiel Padilla, that “it has recently come to my attention that the Mexican Government has contemplated that in view of discrimination which may exist against Mexicans resident in this State, Mexican laborers who are being sent elsewhere in the United States under existing agreements between the Mexican and United States Governments will not be sent to Texas.” While he mentioned efforts to legislate an end to discrimination, Stevenson made his intentions clear in informing Padilla that the cotton-growing areas around Corpus Christi expected a large harvest in 1943 and therefore required Mexican labor. He concluded the letter by assuring Padilla, “I desire further to assure Your Excellency that the people of this State will wait with the highest interest the decision of the Mexican Government which I hope will permit Mexican workers to come to Texas in order to work on our farms, where they are so desperately needed.” Padilla responded a few days later, writing that he appreciated the governor’s efforts, but that only

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when the chronic nature of discrimination was eliminated would Mexico consider lifting the blacklist.\textsuperscript{36}

When their resolution did not cause Mexico to budge, the state government next sought to deal with the situation by forming the Good Neighbor Commission.\textsuperscript{37} The Executive Secretary, Pauline Kibbe, wrote to other members of the commission a year after its founding, “As you know, the occurrence which actually brought on the creation of the Good Neighbor Commission was the refusal of the Mexican Government, in the spring of 1943, to allow emergency agricultural labor to come into Texas to assist in harvesting the crop because of the ‘conditions’ which existed here. When the Commission was set up, we agreed that our first responsibility was to ascertain exactly what those ‘conditions’ were and then formulate some program of action to permanently clear up the situation, not only with regard to farm laborers, but as concerned all Latin Americans in Texas.”\textsuperscript{38}

The Commission’s efforts to discover these “conditions” led them to the following realizations several years later that nicely capture the nature of the Commission’s activities: “The Second World War brought another wave of immigrants to Texas to work on farms, ranches, and in industry. Those brought in legally were augmented by waves of ‘wet-backs’ and for the first time, state-wide physical evidence of discrimination appeared in public places – restaurants,

\textsuperscript{37} Stevenson only authorized the creation of the Commission, however, after he found out that funding for it would come from the State Department’s Office of Inter-American Affairs. Otey M. Scruggs, “Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947,” Pacific Historical Review 32 (1963), 257.
\textsuperscript{38} Pauline Kibbe to Good Neighbor Commission, December 29, 1944, File 1990/16-1, Good Neighbor Commission Collection, TSA.
schools, hotels, movie houses and rental properties – and this brought about a wave of incidents, particularly from Mexicans of improved economic circumstances and from soldiers." While the author of this report seemed to have forgotten that there was no legal contracting of workers in Texas from Mexico during World War II (though it is unclear if he referred to braceros or legal immigrants), he also made the argument that wartime immigration created discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. This type of superficial investigation into issues of discrimination led scholar George Sanchez to complain that the Commission was nothing more than a "glorified tourist agency" meant to paper over incidents so that Mexico would eliminate the bracero blacklist.

Two episodes in particular illustrate the modus operandi of the Commission. The most notorious instance of discrimination in which the Commission found itself embroiled was the Felix Longoria affair. Longoria was a Mexican American from Three Rivers, south of San Antonio, who entered the military in 1944 and shipped out to the Pacific. He died in action, but his body did not return to Three Rivers until January 1949. When his widow and family tried to arrange for a wake at the only funeral home in Three Rivers, they were

40 George Sanchez to Senator Ralph Yarborough, April 12, 1954, Box 3, Folder 4, Ed Idar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin.
41 Patrick Carroll seems to indicate that Carroll enlisted and was not drafted, but that point is not absolutely clear. See Patrick J. Carroll, Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
told by the owner that he did not provide such services for Mexicans because the town’s “whites wouldn’t like it.”

Word of this event quickly reached Dr. Hector Garcia, a veteran and founder of the American G.I. Forum, in nearby Corpus Christi. Several months earlier Garcia and his group had undertaken a study of conditions in South Texas labor camps and segregated schools. The reports of their findings revealed shocking conditions, but these revelations received little attention from the press or politicians. With the Longoria affair, however, Garcia found an issue that finally gained traction in his effort to push for Mexican American civil rights. The local, state, national, and international press began to take notice when he demanded that the funeral home allow Longoria’s wake, but the issue grew even more when recently-elected Senator Lyndon Johnson publicly objected to the treatment of Longoria and his family, eventually receiving permission from President Truman to have Longoria’s body interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

43 “Report on Schools in Sandia, Texas,” April 11, 1948, reported that school children were forced to use open-air toilets in shockingly filthy condition, and that the small segregated school in this town “should be condemned and torn down and lumber sold for firewood.” Box 21, Folder 8, Hector Garcia Papers, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. The conditions at the labor camps in the region almost defy belief, with almost every one inspected by Garcia unsuitable for livestock, much less humans. Almost all of them lacked water, had toilets overflowing with feces, and suffered from epidemic rates of dysentery. “Labor Camp Investigation and Report,” April 22, 1948, Box 91, Folder 59, Garcia Papers. The only attention that these reports seemed to garner came from the State Bureau of Sanitary Engineering, which traveled to the same labor camps as Garcia and found that “sanitation was found to be almost exactly as reported by Dr. Hector P. Garcia and extremely unsatisfactory.” A engineer from the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering concluded that the “camps are entirely inadequate and unsanitary to the extent that they are not fit for human habitation” and that they “should be abandoned and torn down inasmuch as they are not subject to practical improvements and are a definite public health menace to occupants and neighbors.” N.E. Davis and J.W. Wilson to George Cox, Pay 28, 1948. Box 47, Folder 55, Garcia Papers.
Beyond the obvious civil rights implication of this case, it complicated the ongoing negotiations on the bracero program between the United States and Mexico. As a concrete example of anti-Mexican discrimination in Texas, it gave more artillery to those in Mexico who sought to maintain the blacklist against bracero contracting to Texas. The Good Neighbor Commission took this threat to Texas’s standing in relation to the bracero program as its point of departure. An official memorandum from the Commission after Johnson’s intervention stated that Garcia “was right to insist on the availability of the funeral home chapel for services for Felix Longoria. However, he could have adjusted the case without publicity; for instance, by appealing to the Good Neighbor Commission.” The memorandum then continued, “National news is, in the 20th Century, international news. United States prestige and good will were damaged abroad by the ever-ready anti-United States press agents. Specifically, diplomatic conversations with Mexico on the subject of a labor contract were stopped.” Turning to the Anglos of Three Rivers, the Commission stated that they “did not recognize the serious international dangers of their customs of discrimination against Mexicans.”

In other words, the Good Neighbor Commission remained unconcerned with discrimination as such. Only when its impact moved beyond the local level and into the realm of international politics did it confront the situation.

44 Good Neighbor Commission official memorandum, February 11, 1949, File 1989/59-17, Good Neighbor Commission Collection, TSA.
45 Patrick Carroll paints the GNC in a much more positive light, calling it a “well-intentioned mediator,” but I think he overstates its intentions of doing anything but covering up the situation. See Carroll, Felix Longoria’s Wake, 176. Still, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Longoria Affair as a catalyst for the post-war Mexican American civil rights movement. The G.I. Forum and an energized LULAC followed a similar path to the NAACP during these years, pushing a series of cases through the courts, culminating in a number of landmark decisions in the 1950s. The G.I. Forum also built off of the momentum of the Longoria Affair to lead a number of
The second episode, while far less important than the Longoria affair, provided a glimpse of the everyday affairs and concerns of the Commission. Neville Penrose, who was appointed chairman of the Commission by arch-conservative Allan Shivers when he ascended to the governorship upon the death of the previous governor in 1949, wrote to another member of the Commission in August 1952, after Mexico had lifted the blacklist against braceros in Texas, with a new idea he called the “Bracero Sample Project.” He wrote, “I am sending you a bundle of Mexico City newspapers. I wish you would pore over them and get the names of some nationally advertised products in this country, also being marketed down there. Something like Life Buoy Soap, and Phillips Milk of Magnesia. Write to some of these organizations and see what we can do about collecting a little kit to hand these braceros as they go back to Mexico. I do not think it should be very large or expensive. If it is just 25 cents or 50 cents worth of merchandise it will serve our purpose and I think it would be very good advertising for the donors and a perfect place for the letter we contemplate.” He then continued, “I am completely sold on the idea that we must do something with a quarter of a million potential salesmen. They come up here, they stay for a while and go back to Mexico. We must – we positively must – do everything we can to send these laborers back singing our praises. I can think of nothing more important for the Good Neighbor Commission than this project.”

46 Not satisfied poll tax drives and other efforts to achieve some political control by the Mexican American majority in South Texas. The results were not immediately apparent, but these post-war efforts would help build up to the electoral campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s that changed the face of South Texas politics.

46 Neville G. Penrose to Vaughan Bryant, August 14, 1952, File 1989/59-19, Good Neighbor Commission Collection, TSA.
that braceros did enough work while contracted in the United States, Penrose and the Commission clearly believed that returning braceros should be sent back as walking billboards for US consumer items. While the project never actually occurred, it provides a stunning example of how the Commission viewed its responsibilities. They did not seek to protect Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas, but rather to muffle news of discriminatory acts and help the economic elites of the state to secure cheap labor and new customers.

The Good Neighbor Commission lasted until the 1980s, but never as anything more than an under-funded public relations body that did little more than try to contain controversy over periodic cases of discrimination. As the Assistant Director of the Commission wrote to a local group in Eagle Pass, the primary job of the Commission was to “look into matters of reported discrimination against Latin Americans and to smooth them over on the local level to the satisfaction of all, thus avoiding widespread and unfavorable publicity for your city.” In the end, however, the Good Neighbor Commission served its purpose, as the Mexican government did finally accede to contracting braceros for employment in Texas.

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While the growers of Texas griped half-heartedly about not having the option of legally contracting workers from Mexico during the war, the bracero program was operating in the rest of the nation. Through a complex arrangement of overlapping jurisdictions among the Department of Agriculture, the Department of State, the United States Employment Service, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service the wartime bracero program operated as an executive
branch program with very little oversight from the legislature. Congress’s belated approval came with the passage of Public Law 45 on April 29, 1943, which accepted the basic parameters of the international agreement.\textsuperscript{47} These basic standards continued until 1947 when the wartime program came to an end two years after the war itself.\textsuperscript{48}

During the program’s first year, 1942, only 4,203 braceros came to the United States. The number of braceros increased sharply after 1942, however, with more than two hundred thousand coming from 1942-1947: 53,098 in 1943, 62,170 in 1944, 49,494 in 1945, 32,043 in 1946, and 19,632 in 1947.\textsuperscript{49} More important than the total numbers, however, is where these workers were sent. The Pacific Northwest and California received the vast majority of braceros during the war (63 percent in California, 15 percent for the Northwest), though a total of twenty-four states received workers from Mexico.\textsuperscript{50} As the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor noted in its 1951 examination of the bracero program, “The areas served by the war emergency program were high-wage States which had been gaining population by in-migration during the preceding

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\textsuperscript{47} The law also erased the possibility of the bracero program allowing for a back-door application of wage and hour standards to domestic farmworkers, adding a statutory basis to the removal of the program from the oversight of the Farm Security Administration. See Cindy Hahamovitch, \emph{The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 173-174.

\textsuperscript{48} Calavita, \emph{Inside the State}, 20-23. According to Rasmussen, “Hostilities actually ceased August 14, 1945. However, official determination of this cessation was not made during the year and an appropriate sentence was inserted in the 1946 appropriation bill, extending the authority to admit laborers under Section 5 (g) of the Farm Labor Supply Appropriation Act, 1944, for the continuance of the program.” Rasmussen, \emph{History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program}, 227.

\textsuperscript{49} Galarza, \emph{Merchants of Labor}, 52-53; Craig, \emph{Bracero Program}, 50.

\textsuperscript{50} Craig, \emph{Bracero Program}, 50.

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As a result, the farm interests used the foreign contract laborers to stall the upward trend in wages caused by the increase in employment opportunities in war production in many of these states.

These decreasing wage levels did not go far enough for agribusiness interests, however. Edward O'Neal of the American Farm Bureau Federation made a series of complaints before a Senate subcommittee in 1943 that growers continued to repeat throughout the life of the bracero program. He argued that the unregulated employment of workers from Mexico, both the semi-organized World War I program and the hiring of undocumented workers along the border, "worked just fine until the Administration got to fooling with it." He rejected the need for or the utility of the standards set by the Mexican government for minimum wages and living and working conditions of contracted workers, instead declaring that, "in former years all you had to do was go to Mexico and look at the men who came in and worked under the old conditions . . . they got Mexicans in large numbers to come over and do this work."  

In fact, many growers continued to employ unauthorized Mexicans in large numbers. Most prominent were the Texas growers left outside of the bracero agreement, who simply shrugged off the official rebuke of the Mexican government and went back to employing illegal immigrants in larger numbers.

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51 President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), 55. As will be seen below, the geographical dispersal changed drastically during the post-war program, as Texas received the largest share of braceros until the last years of the program. The Pacific Northwest contracted few braceros in the post-war period, sending the increased number of Mexican contract workers instead to states like Arkansas and New Mexico that received no bracers during the war.

52 Quoted in David G. Gutiérrez, Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 139-140.
than ever as wartime demands sent crop prices back up to levels not seen since the end of World War I. Even though the bracero agreement with Mexico ostensibly bound the United States to keep undocumented immigrants from crossing north of the border, the Border Patrol and the INS took a hands-off approach with regards to the labor needs of border area growers, especially in South Texas. As historian Otey Scruggs argued, "Since Texans were unable to acquire braceros, the American government was more easily persuaded to acquiesce in their use of wetbacks." The Assistant Commissioner of Immigration, W.F. Kelly, later wrote, "At times, due to manpower shortages and critical need for agricultural production brought on by the war, the Service officers were instructed to defer the apprehension of Mexicans employed on Texas farms where to remove them would likely result in loss of the crops. . . . This situation resulted first in an increased illegal migration and second in [encouraging] Texas farmers, particularly in the border areas, to rely more and more on 'wetback' labor for producing their crops." 

Texas growers did not worry about the blacklist creating any labor shortages because Mexican farmworkers continued to come on their own. Farmers knew that the seemingly endless supply of workers crossing the border from Mexico guaranteed a steady oversupply of potential field workers. Concerns over the continuation of the bracero program and the Mexican blacklist had little effect on the day-to-day operations of South Texas growers. As World War II receded further into the past, however, the nature and terms of the program

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53 Scruggs, "United States, Mexico, and the Wetbacks," 152.
54 Ibid.
continued to change, and Texas became more central to these alterations in the international agreement.

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The bracero program definitively shed its origins as an emergency measure in the years from 1947-1951 and evolved into a permanent feature of US-Mexican relations and the agricultural economy. However, these years also witnessed a slow evolution of the program as each nation tried to gain an upper hand in the administration of the increasingly contentious agreement. Growers in the US sought to mold the bracero accords to their needs. Mexico sought to gain leverage over negotiations during this brief interregnum, but found their efforts frustrated time and again by increasingly aggressive, unilateral actions by the US government and its growers. As a result, by 1951 the United States and its growers had gained an upper-hand in their dealings with the Mexican government, and had begun to shed the earlier protections against wage deflation, job displacement, and the hiring of illegal labor that served as cornerstones of the original wartime agreement.

The general terms of the wartime program continued until 1949. On the ground, however, the basic nature of the bracero program changed drastically during the two years from 1947-1949, predating the alterations in the international agreement that came in 1949. The most important of these changes was the institution of a process known as “drying out” that converted illegal immigrants

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55 According to Ernesto Galarza, “Notwithstanding the views of the Department, some employers continued to plead an acute need for braceros and it was on their behalf that recruitment was extended through 1949. This was done on the basis of permits granted by the Department of Justice under provisions of the 1917 immigration law.” Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 48.
into legal braceros. One of the primary reasons that the Mexican government had agreed to the wartime bracero program in the first place had been the hope that it would drastically reduce, if not eliminate, the flow of unauthorized migrants leaving for the United States without any legal protections. The lack of any stringent border controls and the blacklist on Texas growers combined to do the opposite. The flow of illegal immigrants into the United States dramatically increased. As a result the Mexican government proposed a new system by which these illegal entrants could be incorporated into the bracero system so that they would not fall outside of the protections written into the bracero contracts. The US government and growers agreed to “drying out” as a simple way to legitimize the continued use of unauthorized laborers.\(^\text{56}\)

The two nations signed new agreements in 1947 that authorized the process of “drying out.”\(^\text{57}\) While many growers in Texas remained skeptical of the bracero program, fearing that it represented a dangerous precedent for government regulation of agricultural labor, many still took advantage of the new agreement to enter the bracero program on their terms. Through this innovation, farm interests found that the Mexican government and the bracero program as a whole had come to them, allowing growers to simply legalize the workers they would have employed anyway. In theory, “drying out” should also have forced Texas growers to live up to the minimum wage and adverse effect standards established in the original agreement, but lack of enforcement (or simply the will


to enforce) allowed these growers to maintain the same employment practices as they had during the blacklist period. According to two scholars examining the situation in South Texas during these years, "It is a matter of common knowledge in the Valley that many of the growers who used contract workers at the same time used wetbacks yet we were not able to trace a single case where a contract has been broken in the Valley for this reason."\(^{58}\) They further observed, "No official word is given that the farmers are to be left alone, but the Inspectors soon learn that they are apt to be called before some kind of investigating board if they are too zealous in doing their jobs. . . . One Inspector, for example, stated that he never picks up a wetback engaged in irrigating. . . . One of the older Inspectors has a policy of not picking up anyone who is working or who is carrying any agricultural implement that would indicate that he had been working."\(^{59}\)

As a result, the INS legalized 55,000 unauthorized workers in Texas alone during 1947. By comparison, the other bracero states imported or reauthorized only 31,331 braceros during that same year. Thus, while the blacklist remained in effect for Texas, the shift had already begun by which it became the primary user of legal Mexican labor. As historian Arthur Corwin argued, "By that date Mexico plainly had lost control of the migratory labor program, and many a Texas employer was grinning with satisfaction."\(^{60}\) The same trend continued during the next two years. From 1947-1949 only 74,600 Mexicans came under contract

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., 79-80.

from Mexico compared to 142,200 workers legalized within the United States through "drying out." Thus, by virtue of the process of legalization of unauthorized workers alone, Mexico had lost much of its leverage in dictating (or even negotiating) the terms of the bracero program.

Within the US government, however, the Department of Labor and the INS moved to attain more control over the program by unilaterally opening the border to Mexican workers. According to Kitty Calavita, "A combination of factors – including the continued refusal of Mexico to allow Texas employers to contract braceros, the lack of a formal border recruitment system, and the virtual employer boycott on recruiting braceros from the interior of Mexico – had resulted in the piling up of thousands of hopeful braceros in border towns." To relieve this situation and to provide labor to growers, the INS and the Labor Department sought to throw open the border. The Department of State reprised its frequent role as the voice of reason, pointing out that opening the border represented a clear violation of their international agreement and would drastically complicate future diplomatic relations with Mexico (and presumably the rest of Latin America). State Department officials had little capacity to restrain officials on the border from committing such a violation of the bracero accords, however, and could only watch as INS officials took the situation into their own hands in 1948, creating a profound crisis within the bracero program.

The Mexican government authorized the border recruitment of two thousand braceros to alleviate the crowding in Ciudad Juárez on October 1,

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61 President's Commission, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 53.
62 Calavita, Inside the State, 29-30.
1948. Problems emerged when cotton growers reported a prevailing wage of $2.50 per hundredweight. Mexican officials rejected this wage rate, instead insisting on $3.00 per hundredweight for all braceros. INS officials in El Paso, angry over what they deemed "an outright breach of the labor agreement," decided to open up the border to all willing Mexican farmworkers, bypassing the formal structures and protections of the international agreement. INS officials passed word to workers massed on the Mexican side that work was available at $2.50. From October 16-18, approximately six thousand flowed across the border at El Paso, were herded together by the Border Patrol, arrested for illegal entry, sent to temporary enclosures, and then paroled to cotton growers. Grover Wilmoth, the District Director of the INS at El Paso, justified the opening of the border by arguing that "they need the work, our farmers need them and the crops were going to waste." Robert Goodwin, Director of the United States Employment Service, testified that Wilmoth created the "El Paso incident" (as it came to be known) "on the allegation that the present treaty is not working in that we are not getting needed farm labor from Mexico." The Department of Labor added its two cents on the matter when Don Larin, head of the Farm Placement Service, declared, "Mexico agreed to send braceros who would receive the prevailing wages. But Mexican officials came up with a demand that the laborers

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63 Ibid., 29-30.
64 Don Larin, quoted in Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 50.
65 Ibid., 49-50. Galarza also mentioned that these 6,000 workers "glutted the Texas labor market and, according to press reports, wages dropped to $1.50."
66 Quoted in Kirstein, Anglo Over Bracero, 69.
67 Quoted in Ibid. Kirstein also noted, "It seems certain that no direct order emanated from the White House to open the border, for the president was critical of USES and INS laxity in honoring international agreements."
receive $3.00 a hundred pounds for the first cotton picking. These Mexican officials were pointing a pistol at the American farmers’ head.”

The Mexican government reacted to this breach of the agreement by immediately canceling the bracero accord, though the flow of workers continued for several months through a unilateral program operated by the INS and the Department of Labor, the agencies responsible for the El Paso incident. For its part, the US government informed Mexico that any new agreement must not include unilateral blacklisting, clearly meant to lift the continuing ban on contracting to Texas. For months the two countries tried to gain leverage over the other in crafting a new agreement, which finally took shape in 1949, eight months after the previous accord had been voided.

With the El Paso incident as an object lesson of what a unilateral program might look like if Mexico did not accede to the demands of growers and the US government, the 1949 agreement eliminated unilateral blacklisting, in essence ending the exclusion of Texas from the program, while also extending the “drying out” process. Mexico continued to hold out against growers’ demands that they

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68 Quoted in Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 50.
69 Calavita, Inside the State, 29-30; Kirstein, Anglo Over Bracero, 70.
70 International Executive Agreement, July 29, 1949, Box 3C38, Folder 8, Texas State Federation of Labor Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin. Gus Garcia went to Mexico City during the negotiations to try and convince the Mexican government to deal with undocumented migration: “We precipitated a real crisis in connection with the wetback question, and I feel that we succeeded in getting the Mexican government to agree substantially with the LULAC policy on wetbacks and braceros. The truth of the matter is that there is no real conflict between the two policies, except that Mexico has to agree to the shipping of contract laborers because of tremendous pressure from Washington. I don’t know if Washington will approve the final international agreement or not. It contains so many clauses in behalf of the laborers that the agricultural interests may simply refuse to agree to it. . . . Unfortunately, economic conditions in Mexico are so bad that I doubt that the entire Mexican Army could stem the tide of wetbacks. Mexico is now doing everything within its power to prevent them from coming across, and, for the sake of appearances, the United States Immigration Service is putting on a much better show in certain sections. Nevertheless, the pressure is on more than ever before, and I can’t see any relief
place contracting centers along the border, but that effort too collapsed in August 1950 when Mexico quietly agreed to allow for contracting from the border towns. As a result, the traffic through interior contracting centers decreased drastically and a larger flow of prospective braceros moved toward the US-Mexico border, producing a larger body of potential undocumented immigrants and crushing the Mexican government’s hopes to eliminate (or at least slow down) the flow of unauthorized migrants north of the border. “Mexico had lost its battle to contain the flow of its labor to the United States,” according to historian Peter Kirstein.71

Despite the end of the bracero blacklist, however, Lyle Saunders and Olen Leonard argued that the 1949 agreement “had little effect on the Valley.” Growers remained angry over the continuation of a minimum wage, which rose to forty cents per hour in the new contract, and the requirement that employers pay transportation costs to and from Mexico.72 They had never paid transportation costs for undocumented workers or “dried out” braceros, so they saw no reason to do any different for contract labor. As a result, Valley growers requested few braceros from contracting centers in Mexico. Lower Rio Grande farm associations sent requests for only 1,500 workers to the United States Employment Service in 1950. They remained interested only in legalizing their unauthorized workers already in the fields. Even after a sizeable deportation campaign in 1950 in the Lower Valley, the growers still showed little interest in

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71 Kirstein, Anglo Over Bracero, 76.
72 Saunders and Leonard, Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 56. Two of the major complaints of Valley growers were eliminated in 1950 with the beginning of border contracting and the elimination of a requirement that all contracts last at least four months (Valley growers only wanted braceros for a few weeks at a time).
curbing their employment of unauthorized labor. Instead they cried that the Border Patrol was a "Gestapo outfit" that was "siding with Mexico." 73

Despite these howls of protest, the postwar bracero program continued to evolve toward the wishes of growers and away from the desires of the Mexican government. These changes resulted in a drastic shift in the geographic dispersal of braceros in the United States. As the President's Commission reported, change proceeded at an astonishing rate:

California which in 1945 received 63 percent of the Mexican workers had only 8 percent in 1949. The States of the Northwest, which with California, had 78 percent of the Mexican program in 1945, had no Mexican workers in 1949. Texas, which had no legally contracted Mexicans in wartime, had 46 percent of all Mexican nationals under contract in 1949. New Mexico and Arkansas, which had none of the Mexicans workers in wartime, had 17 and 16 percent, respectively, in 1949. Together, Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas had 79 percent of the 1949 Mexican labor program. 74

Further, the majority of braceros after the war went to low-wage states that "disgorged population during the decade of the thirties," a complete reversal of the situation during the wartime program. 75 These same trends continued in 1950, as only 19,813 new braceros came through contracting centers, while 96,239 became braceros through "drying out," primarily in South Texas. 76 As a result, Texas growers, who were denied braceros during the war, dominated the bracero program for much of the rest of its existence. They may have complained that it was a flawed system that gave Mexico too much influence, but they also began to understand that it could serve as a guarantee of surplus labor that allowed them to

73 Calavita, Inside the State, 35-38; Saunders and Leonard, Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 56.
74 President's Commission, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 55.
75 Ibid.
76 Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 63.
maintain, or even lower, wage rates. Adverse effect clauses in the agreements came to be seen as little more than rhetorical decoration that lacked any capacity for enforcement, vestigial artifacts of a past multilateralism.

The President’s Commission on Migratory Labor investigated these conditions in 1950 and published its findings in 1951. The report began by examining growers’ claims that they required foreign labor to combat rising prices and increased international competition. “Normally, if there were a labor shortage, wages would rise,” the report stated. “Since on the contrary they have declined, it seems reasonable to infer that the supply of illegal alien labor, plus the contract labor the Government admitted or imported, has helped to depress farm wages relative to factory wages.”77 The Commission argued that the process of “drying out” assured a continued flow of unauthorized immigrants.78 Not surprisingly, the Commission pointed to the growers of South Texas as the worst threats to the proper functioning of the program. It rejected the constantly repeated assertion that domestic labor would not do field work in the Valley, instead arguing that the employment of undocumented workers had reduced the wage level below the subsistence level of any US residents.79 The Commission’s recommendations were clear: “Foreign labor importation and contracting [should] be under the terms of intergovernmental agreements which should clearly state the conditions and standards of employment under which the foreign workers are to be employed. These should be substantially the same for all countries. No employer, employer’s representative or association of employers, or labor

77 President’s Commission, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 17.
78 Ibid., 53.
79 Ibid., 78-81.
contractor should be permitted to contract directly with foreign workers for employment in the United States." Clearly, the authors of this report hoped that its conclusions would be applied in the 1951 bracero agreement. Instead, a much different agreement emerged that continued the trends of the previous few years and resulted in an almost complete rejection of the Commission's recommendations.

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The publication of the Commission's report came as Congress considered a bill to extend the bracero program and negotiations between the two countries continued. Mexico demanded that the United States pass a law that made the federal government the guarantor of the contracts, rather than the employers, as it had been during the Second World War. Interested parties within the United States also sought to shape the outcome of the latest alteration of the bracero program. Texas State Federation of Labor official Andy McClellan reported that "we're pouring the messages and wires into Mexico City asking all of the big labor leaders to try to stop the signing of the new bracero accord. . . . In the meantime, however, the Valley farmers are threatening rebellion if nothing is done to get labor for the cotton picking. They have behaved like a bunch of spoiled kids since this deal started, and their 'squawking' is turning a lot of good people against them." Despite these efforts to alter the nature of the renewed labor agreement, however, the bill and negotiations resulted in few concrete changes.

80 Ibid., 178.
81 Andy McClellan to J.J. Hickman, July 16, 1951, Box 3C38, Folder 7, Texas State Federation of Labor Papers, UT-CAH.
That bill, eventually passed as Public Law 78, ignored the recommendations laid out by the Commission, instead providing only a cosmetic stabilization of the program that did nothing to solve issues of adverse effect. It reiterated the restrictions placed on the wartime program – contracting required the certification of non-availability of domestic labor, braceros could create no adverse effect to domestic labor, and employers had to make reasonable efforts to attract domestic workers – but did little to improve the mechanisms for ensuring that employers lived up to these restrictions. Instead, the law permanently erased the decades-old tradition of prohibiting foreign contract labor from entering the United States, while providing no methods for determining labor shortages or prevailing wages. Thus, PL 78 served to maintain and expand the bracero program, with all of its problems left to continue for the life of the agreement. As Kitty Calavita wrote, “PL 78 and subsequent international agreements reestablished the role of the state as farm labor contractor par excellence. . . . PL 78 formalized that commitment, and in so doing, injected increased predictability and control into the contract labor system that had begun a decade earlier as a wartime emergency measure.” Similarly, Ernesto Galarza argued, “Ten years of employer experimentation with braceros concluded with Public Law 78. . . . In a sense, these were years of trial and error as growers made

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82 See Bureau of Employment Security, Department of Labor, “Basic Requirements for Certification of Foreign Workers,” no date, Box 3C38, Folder 7, Texas State Federation of Labor Papers, UT-CAH.
83 Calavita, Inside the State, 46.
one delightful discovery after another. Like the sprinkling systems of mechanized irrigation, braceros could be turned on and off.”

Equally important was the gradual loss of leverage by the Mexican government in shaping the future of the program. While PL 78 made the federal government the ultimate guarantor of contracts, US officials, prodded by growers’ interests demanding cheaper and more plentiful labor, continually worked to erode the Mexican government’s control over the agreement. Mexico entered into negotiations with the United States in late 1953 determined to strengthen the protections within the program, including raising the minimum wage, but the US refused to budge. Instead it returned to a familiar tactic to eliminate any strategic advantage Mexico possessed. By January 1954 these negotiations had fallen apart over Mexico’s desire to eliminate border recruitment and to ensure legitimate determination of prevailing wages and labor shortages. On January 16 the US announced that it would unilaterally contract braceros at the border, again opening the border to undercut the Mexican government as in 1948. For the next few weeks, US officials stood at the border and called out the number of workers needed that day, creating near-riots as thousands crowded at entry points for the chance at legal employment north of the border. The effects of this open-border incident were profound – it proved definitively that the US possessed a trump card in negotiations with Mexico. As long as thousands of Mexicans crowded along the border for the chance to become braceros, the United States and its growers could control the program regardless of the desires of the Mexican

85 Calavita, Inside the State, 65-66; Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 66.
government. By again violating the international agreement, the US brought Mexico to heel and gained complete control over its future operation. This incident was an “irrefutable demonstration of Yankee imperialism,” according to Mexican scholar José Lázaro Salinas.86

With the Mexican government removed as an obstacle to unilateral operation of the Bracero Program, US policymakers looked to eliminate the continued use of undocumented workers in the Southwest, especially in Texas, and consolidate federal control over foreign labor. Growers continued to argue, as they had for decades, that they had an inherent right to Mexican labor, regardless of international accords or immigration law. Thus, they viewed the bracero program as a violation of their rights, even as they availed themselves of contract laborers. As one South Texas landowner explained, “I could go across the border and within a radius of 50 miles hire 12 to 15 good, experienced cowhands. That’s the way we used to do it, we knew these people and they knew us. . . . As it is under the program, we have to take whatever Mexican nationals they give us, and hope they can do the job.”87 Another grower, looking back on these years, wrote that “the Valley cotton farmer became completely dependent upon the wetbacks to harvest his cotton. This seemed to be satisfactory to everyone concerned. . . . A few farmers considered themselves to be farsighted and purchased some of the newfangled cotton picking machines. Their investment was so high that they were reluctant to admit they had bought white

86 José Lázaro Salinas, La Emigración de Braceros: Visión Objetiva de un Problema Mexicano (Mexico, DF: Imprenta Cuauhtémoc, 1955), 12.
87 Jim Griffin quoted in “Wetbacks More than Illegal Aliens to Texans at Hearing,” Corpus Christi Caller (December 12, 1952).
elephants and held out until they could find suckers to sell the machines to.\textsuperscript{88} As long as the option of hiring unauthorized entrants from Mexico remained, mechanization and braceros remained secondary for the growers of South Texas, who decried any efforts to curtail their well-worn practices as illegal and Communist-inspired.

The response to these complaints about the operation of the program and the continued reliance of many growers on undocumented labor came in mid-1954 when the INS moved to entrench the bracero program further by making it the only game in town. The lack of Border Patrol activity in South Texas remained a poorly guarded secret in the early 1950s. In 1952 the Mexican government filed an official complaint with the Department of State after learning that the Border Patrol had been removed from large swaths of South Texas.\textsuperscript{89} Rumors circulated that the head of the Patrol ordered his officers to stay away from the South Texas farm of Governor Allan Shivers, a well-known and unapologetic employer of undocumented Mexican labor.\textsuperscript{90} The Congressional contingents from Texas and the other Southwestern states also limited the federal government's ability to deal with this situation by restricting the flow of money to the INS. As scholar and activist Ernesto Galarza wrote, "It never appeared to be the intention of Congress to finance the Service adequately so that the gateway to

\textsuperscript{90} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 29-30. In June 1952, John Rooney, a Congressman from New York, charged on the floor of the US Congress that Shivers employed illegal labor on his Sharyland Farm.
illegal labor could be firmly closed. . . . With the purse half shut the gate could remain half open."\textsuperscript{91}

During 1954, however, the INS and the Border Patrol conducted a deportation campaign that temporarily altered the traditional, if always unofficial, alliance between border officials and South Texas growers. The newly appointed head of the INS, General Joseph Swing, launched Operation Wetback in the summer of 1954 as a military campaign meant to deport undocumented Mexicans throughout the Southwest. With the support of President Eisenhower and Attorney General Herbert Brownell, the operation began in California in early June by rounding up and repatriating thousands as officers moved north from the Imperial Valley. Before the operation began Swing assured employers that they could legally contract braceros through the INS, but that he intended to rid the Southwest of all illegal entrants, assuring them that "I am quite emphatic about this because I know I am going to run into some opposition in southern Texas."\textsuperscript{92}

Word of the operations in California spread rapidly to Texas, leading tens of thousands of Mexicans to return to Mexico ahead of the deportation force.\textsuperscript{93} South Texas growers, however, either ignored the warnings that Operation Wetback would eventually come to Texas, or simply believed that the INS would not dare take their workers away.\textsuperscript{94} The INS District Director in San Antonio reported that the Valley Farm Bureau "intend[s] to destroy our effort at

\textsuperscript{91} Galarza, \textit{Merchants of Labor}, 61.  
\textsuperscript{92} Quoted in Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 52.  
\textsuperscript{93} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 54.  
\textsuperscript{94} Garcia, \textit{Operation Wetback}, 208.
enforcement of the law here in the Valley.” 95 Some growers, like Governor Shivers, did take the INS seriously and began removing their undocumented workers by the end of June. 96 But most had done nothing by the time the Mobile Task Force arrived in South Texas in early July to begin the operation. Starting on July 3 the task force set up roadblocks and patrolled rail traffic, arresting any illegal entrants attempting to travel north ahead of the deportation sweeps. These efforts led to the apprehension of approximately 800 before the full operation began. The full sweeps began on July 15. By the end of the month more than 40,000 had been captured in South Texas. 97

Rather than return them to Mexico at nearby border towns, however, the INS shipped the vast majority of the deportees hundreds of miles away to Presidio and El Paso in West Texas, approximately 750 miles from the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Not only did this mean that the deportees could not quickly cross the border and return to the same employer, but it also meant that the Mexican government had to cover the transportation of tens of thousands of repatriates from Ojinaga and Ciudad Juárez to their homes. 98 Whether Swing and the INS meant to punish Mexico in this way is unclear, but their actions had the effect of adding to the tensions between the two governments that remained in the aftermath of the unilateral recruitment episode in January.

95 Quoted in Garcia, Operation Wetback, 208-209.
96 Andy McClellan to Jerry Holleman, June 28, 1954, Box 1, Folder 2, Series 7, Texas AFL-CIO Collection (AR-110), Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas, Arlington.
97 Garcia, Operation Wetback, 210-212.
Not surprisingly, the opposition that Swing had anticipated from the growers of South Texas was not long in coming. In addition to the oft-repeated claims that the federal government was trampling their rights, some Valley observers viewed the operation as a far more insidious undertaking. A writer for the *San Benito News* surmised that the "CIO may be getting lists of union membership prospects from the bracero centers. If the Border Patrolmen were racing through cotton fields with pistol in one hand and union membership application in the other, the union bosses in Washington might be content."99 The editor of the *Weslaco News* went even further a few weeks after the operation began, writing, "After watching the tactics of Uncle Sam's invading force of crack tan-shirts for 14 days, it becomes our opinion that the whole situation amounts to about the same thing as undeclared martial law."100 One grower, who described Operation Wetback as an "old-fashioned West Texas rabbit drive," wrote, "It is amazing that the [Task Force] did not meet resistance, even armed resistance, for in four short days the way of life for more than a million people was drastically and irrevocably changed."101

By the time the campaign came to an end in September more than a hundred thousand Mexicans had been deported from South Texas, in addition to an unknown number who left for Mexico just ahead of the task forces.102

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102 Garcia argued that the official INS numbers were vastly over-inflated. They claimed hundreds of thousands of Mexicans had left South Texas ahead of Operation Wetback, but there has never
General Swing had intended when he launched the operation, the removal of unauthorized workers forced South Texas growers to grudgingly accept the need to sign bracero contracts. Between July 1 and July 15 the threat of Operation Wetback led Valley growers to send requests for 30,000 braceros to the Hidalgo reception center, with more than 15,000 Mexicans contracted by the middle of the month. The previous year, by contrast, only seven hundred had been contracted in the first two weeks of July. The increased use of braceros in the nation as a whole, and South Texas in particular, continued for the next few years. One Texas grower noted, “the bracero substituted for our wetbacks for several years. We did not accept him as a permanent fixture, but we contemplated using him for quite a while.” When the bracero program reached its peak of contracted workers in 1956, Texas received forty-three percent of the total of 445,197, almost twice as many as second-place California.

Rather than seeking to keep these farmers from hiring foreign workers, Operation Wetback served as a means to shift the source of those foreign workers. As such, the deportation campaign served as a complement to the border incident in January of the same year – the first subjugated Mexican desires to US labor supply needs, while the second disciplined growers who sought to avoid bureaucratic entanglements and federal regulation of their workforce. More than ever before, the federal government assumed the role of labor contractor,

been any corroboration of these numbers. Presumably, they reported the actual number of deportations, but inflated the number of voluntary departures for the sake of publicity. Garcia, Operation Wetback, 227-232.  
104 McBride, Vanishing Bracero, 21.  
105 Kirstein, Anglo Over Bracero, 103; Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 79.
maintaining within the executive branch a benevolent monopoly on the recruitment of foreign labor. As Kitty Calavita argued, "the drive had the effect of buttressing and entrenching a system of contract labor that was uniquely suited to agricultural production."\textsuperscript{106} The G.I. Forum denigrated this new system as "legalized wetbackism."\textsuperscript{107} Along the same lines, Ernesto Galarza declared, "The most skeptical of farm employers could see that the private black market was no longer vital, now that a public one could be created at will. . . . The Wetback obbligato thus ended on a harmonious chord. In the difficult transition from clandestine to legal labor which it had marked, the essential controls over the labor pool had not been jarred and the principles of employer determination of wages had not been undermined."\textsuperscript{108}

For the remainder of the 1950s Texas was the primary recipient of braceros. The slight change in the source of their labor did little to change growers' general employment practices and wage rates, however. According to Andy McClellan, a Texas State Federation of Labor official well versed in the Valley labor situation, a number of bracero users ignored the fifty-cent minimum bracero wage and substituted a standardized wage of thirty cents an hour (though they dropped even lower in some areas). Employers simply forced workers to sign falsified payroll documents.\textsuperscript{109} In April 1955 the Mexican Consul at McAllen stated in an interview that 40% of the bracero users in his consular

\textsuperscript{106} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 55.
\textsuperscript{107} "Down in the Valley: A Supplementary Report on Developments in the Wetback and Bracero Situation of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas Since Publication of 'What Price Wetbacks?'", no date, Box 65, Folder 14, Garcia Papers, TAMU-CC.
\textsuperscript{108} Galarza, \textit{Merchants of Labor}, 69, 71.
\textsuperscript{109} Andrew C. McClellan, Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies and Manpower of the House Committee on Agriculture, March 21, 1955, Box 1, Folder 3, Series 7, AR-110, UTA.
district, which covered much of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, violated the minimum wage. A few months later he claimed that the percentage was even higher.\textsuperscript{110} As a result, the Rio Grande Valley had the highest bracero desertion rate in the nation, at 20-35\% in the mid-1950s.\textsuperscript{111} For its part, the federal government did little to solve the problem, often only warning minimum wage violators.\textsuperscript{112}

By the early 1960s, however, the trajectory of the bracero program changed. What had seemed like a permanent part of the US agricultural economy in the late 1950s suddenly ran up against pressure from two sides: demands for the end of the program from Mexican Americans and organized labor, and increased use of mechanization in the cotton fields of Texas, which made braceros superfluous. While the AFL-CIO and Mexican American groups like the G.I. Forum and LULAC had long criticized the bracero program, growers in South Texas and elsewhere also slowly turned against the program as bracero minimum wages increased and agricultural technology improved. Both trends came together at the beginning of the Kennedy presidency to bring the international agreement to an anticlimactic end when Congress failed to renew the program in 1964.

Texas growers proved as important to the disappearance of the program as they were to its beginning and its enormous growth during the 1950s. The


\textsuperscript{111} Ngai, \textit{Impossible Subjects}, 147.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 144.
majority of braceros in Texas worked in cotton fields, and when cotton growers turned against the program they eliminated their state as the primary bracero recipient almost overnight. In 1961 Texas received 40% (approximately 116,000) of all braceros, while California received 34% (approximately 100,000). A year later, after Congress passed a seventy-cent minimum wage for the program, Texas received only 15% (29,000) of the braceros while California received 60% (116,000).\textsuperscript{113} Total numbers decreased even further in 1963, when Texas growers contracted only 17,700 braceros for 20% of the national total, barely more than Florida and Michigan and only a third of California's total.\textsuperscript{114} In 1964, the final year of the bracero program, braceros made up a negligible force in the Texas cotton fields. In their stead came the much-delayed mechanization of Texas cotton.\textsuperscript{115} The Good Neighbor Commission reported in 1967 that "Texas cotton farmers, anticipating the day when Braceros would no longer be available as shock troops in the fields, started converting to machine harvesting several years ago. Thus the gradual annual reduction in the number of Braceros allowed to enter, and the final termination of Public Law 78, found Texas growers relatively well prepared to carry on without them."\textsuperscript{116}

The growers themselves, who had pleaded so fervently for these braceros just a few years earlier, evinced little nostalgia for the end of the program. As one grower noted as the international agreement came to a screeching halt, "I have

\textsuperscript{113} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 144, 218.
\textsuperscript{114} Department of Agriculture, "Termination of the Bracero Program: Some Effects on Farm Labor and Migrant Housing Needs," June 1965, File 1989/59-42, Good Neighbor Commission Papers, TSA.
\textsuperscript{115} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 144.
said that we had to have braceros to pick our 1954 cotton crop; then, later, I said that braceros were not needed at all in 1962; so something must have happened during those years besides our hassle with Mr. Goodwin [Director of Bureau of Employment Security]. Quite a bit did happen," he noted. "Simply stated," he went on "Valley farmers changed to using machines to pick their rank cotton and to using local and migratory labor to snap their burnt-up cotton, and the Valley ginners each invested fifty thousand dollars or more in cleaning machinery, trailers, and other things in order to properly handle this rougher harvested cotton." Newpapers throughout Texas echoed these sentiments. The *Dallas Times Herald* editorialized that "Texas' farm labor will not be much affected by the end of the bracero farm program, farmers have predicted, because the federal 70-cent hourly wage minimum for braceros had already priced them out." Likewise, the *Corpus Christi Caller* argued, "The U.S. Congress may think it killed the Mexican contract worker program last week. All it actually did was write the obituary."

At the same time that bracero recruitment numbers dropped in the early 1960s, a number of groups spoke out against the continuation of the contract labor program. Henry Muñoz, the Director of the Department of Equal Opportunity for the Texas AFL-CIO, succinctly summarized Mexican American and labor opposition to the foreign labor program when he informed the Department of Labor, "We imported 195,000 Mexican workers [in 1963] at a time when our total

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119 "Farmers Themselves Actually Killed the Mexican Contract Worker Program," *Corpus Christi Caller* (June 9, 1963).
rate of unemployment is almost 5 million – 4,846,000. I doubt if history offers any other example of any nation suffering from massive unemployment recruiting hundreds of thousands of foreign workers of an unskilled character, to do unskilled work in the nation of recruitment.\textsuperscript{120} Though organized labor and agribusiness interests seldom made comfortable bedfellows, both combined quite effectively to end the bracero program.

* * *

While Mexican Braceros poured into South Texas during the peak years of the international agreement, Mexican Americans poured out. The proper functioning of the international agreement should have made this impossible, or at least less likely, since Braceros were not supposed to replace domestic workers, but the failure of enforcement mechanisms and the lack of concern for domestic labor that animated the primary supporters of the bracero program meant that these two massive population shifts occurred simultaneously, each reinforcing the other.

An increase in out-of-state migration occurred during World War II as many Mexican Americans left Texas for employment in the booming war industries and the fields of the Midwest and West. Rather than decrease after the war, however, the number of out-of-state migrants who registered with the state jumped from 22,460 in 1945 to 39,801 in 1947 and 71,353 in 1949, not to mention the unknown number who left without registering. At the same time, undocumented workers made up a substantial portion (if not a majority) of the South Texas agricultural workforce while tens of thousands of these unauthorized

\textsuperscript{120} Henry Muñoz, December 4, 1964, Box 5, Folder 6, Series 7, AR-110, UTA.
foreign workers became braceros through the “drying out” process. As civil rights activist Gus Garcia wrote to the editor of the Corpus Christi Caller, “So long as stalwart champions of the people – like your idolized Mr. Allan Shivers – continue to hire wetback labor and to harass the Immigration Officials in their attempts to enforce the law, thousands upon thousands of South Texas families will continue to be uprooted year after year from their homes and forced to wander about the country, seeking a living, or at least a subsistence wage.”

When Texas growers first gained access to workers legally contracted from Mexico in the early 1950s, the migrant stream out of Texas only grew. Underlying this amplification of previous migration patterns was an unchanging belief among the political and economic elites of South Texas that Mexican Americans refused to do field work, necessitating their reliance on foreign labor, whether legal or illegal. Even while Tejanos worked in fields throughout the nation, farmers in South Texas claimed that they refused to do agricultural work. As the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor reported, “Texas farm employers told us that Texas-Mexicans were ‘no good,’ but farm employers in Arizona, Colorado, and other States told us with equal emphasis that the Texas-Mexicans are good and reliable workers.”

During the early 1950s, before the crackdown of Operation Wetback, a state representative from the Lower Valley echoed this feeling in justifying the employment of undocumented workers: “The

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122 Gus Garcia to Robert Jackson, December 9, 1954, Box 1, Folder 1, Gus Garcia Papers, UT-Benson.
123 President’s Commission, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 2.
farmers need labor; the wetbacks need work; and the local Spanish-speaking people have a gypsy spirit which makes them want to travel. They just can’t resist going north each year, and it is fortunate that there are wetbacks around to take their place. Then, too, the local Spanish-speaking people are tending to leave agriculture. They don’t like the hard work." An employee of the Texas Employment Commission likewise reported that local Mexican Americans were “extremely lazy and won’t work, even for 50 or 60 cents an hour.” Whether these opinions came from willful ignorance or not, Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz came close to the truth when he wrote, “The false notion that ‘Americans won’t do stoop labor’ was carefully nurtured from the truer fact that they won’t work for stoop wages.”

In 1955, the first full season after Operation Wetback, Texas growers imported just over 150,000 braceros. 75,000 of these went to the four counties of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and another 19,000 went to the seven county area stretching from Laredo north through the Winter Garden. These same counties sent almost 70,000 Mexican Americans into the interstate migrant stream. In such a situation, growers could complain that they suffered from a labor shortage, but only because their reliance on foreign labor had long since pushed local Mexican Americans out of the local employment market. Thus, the bracero minimum became the prevailing wage, as there was no local workforce against which adverse effect could be measured. Even when a small local workforce did

125 Anonymous, quoted in Ibid., 67-68.
remain, as Lamar Jones found, these protections meant very little on the ground: "In the Rio Grande Valley in the 1950s it was not uncommon for domestic workers to receive 35 to 40 cents per hour for chopping cotton while braceros similarly employed earned 50 cents per hour." As a result, by the late 1950s agricultural wages in South Texas dropped below the rates of the late 1940s (the peak years of undocumented workers). Unlike the 1960s, however, mechanization remained negligible during the 1950s as farmers still found little economic utility in the purchase and maintenance of expensive harvesting machinery. Clearly, growers’ preference for foreign labor made almost inevitable these entries into the migrant stream.

The decrease in bracero recruitment by South Texas growers in the early 1960s did not reverse this trend, however. The 1961 migration included an estimated 127,000 from South Texas, up from approximately 105,000 each of the previous two years. Five counties in South Texas sent the largest number of these migrants – 18,000 from Hidalgo (McAllen), 12,000 from Webb (Laredo), 10,000 from Bexar (San Antonio), 9,000 from Cameron (Brownsville), and 8,000 from Nueces (Corpus Christi). The next two years witnessed similar numbers of migrants – 127,800 in 1962 and 128,000 in 1963. Importantly, however, the nature of these migrations had changed, as the number of interstate migrants

128 Ruth Graves (Research Director of Texas Committee on Migrant Farm Workers), "Research Summary on Effects of the Bracero Program," January 11, 1961, Box 3, Folder 8, Series 11, AR-278, UTA.
130 Texas Council on Migrant Labor, "Texas Migrant Workers – 1961: Summary of Data," Box 9, Folder 5, AR-46, UTA.
increased from 91,000 in 1962 to 95,000 in 1961, while intrastate migrants decreased from 36,800 in 1962 to 33,000 in 1963. Likewise, a larger percentage of these migrants came from the primary South Texas counties – 25,000 from Hidalgo, 10,000 from Cameron, 8,000 from Bexar, and 5,000 from Nueces. 131

The combined effects of widespread mechanization and the return of South Texas farmers to undocumented workers blunted any improvement for domestic farm labor that could have come with the end of the bracero program.

The upward trends in interstate migration continued after the end of the bracero program. The number of registered migrants grew to 167,000 in 1965, 38,000 more than the previous year. Interstate migration grew to 128,500, 24% more than the previous year, but the intrastate stream grew from 25,000 in 1964 to 38,600 in 1965, an increase of 54%, as jobs previously closed to domestic workers opened with the end of the bracero program. 132 The migrant stream shrunk slightly in 1966, down to 162,000. Interstate migration remained roughly the same, but intrastate migration reversed the trend of the previous year and declined drastically (16%) as fewer South Texas migrants proved willing to accept employment from Texas growers. 133 These trends continued for the rest of the decade, so that by 1972 only 30,000 registered as migrants, and almost all of these traveled out of state. 134 Some growers went to the trouble of claiming that labor contractors threatened their livelihood by sending Mexican Americans

132 Good Neighbor Commission, “Texas Migrant Labor, the 1965 Migration,” May 1966, Box 137, Folder 45, Garcia Papers, TAMU-CC.
elsewhere for employment, echoing their predecessors’ claims during the 1920s, but most simply returned to their well-worn practice of hiring undocumented workers with little concern for the Mexican Americans in their midst. When the Good Neighbor Commission predicted that “other states will intensify and perfect still more their methods of recruiting in Texas, since Texas has far more surplus farm labor than any other state,” most growers simply ignored it. 135

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When the bracero program came to a halt after two decades in 1964, all of the justifications that politicians and growers had repeated since the beginning of World War II for their continued use of foreign labor disappeared, replaced instead by quiet resignation and shrugged shoulders. 136 Despite the hushed ending to the contract labor system from Mexico, the bracero program served as an essential aspect of the development of the post-war economic order in the United States. While it only provided labor for agriculture after World War II, never again moving into the realm of industrial employment, it served as the nexus of two economic forces with enormous consequences for the future. The bracero program served at once as both a regional variant of a global trend toward increased reliance on guestworkers and the widespread adoption of a local variant of labor relations, applying the peculiar arrangements developed in South Texas

135 Good Neighbor Commission, “Texas Migrant Labor, the 1965 Migration,” May 1966, Box 137, Folder 45, Garcia Papers, TAMU-CC.

136 Southwestern growers tried for several more years to receive Mexican contract workers through the H-2 program, but were never successful. See Cindy Hahamovitch, manuscript in progress, 2008, Chapter 5, 39. In 1968, for instance, the Texas Citrus Mutual, a Rio Grande Valley farmers’ association, requested workers directly from the Mexican government to alleviate a shortage they claimed would threaten the upcoming grapefruit harvest. They proposed that the workers be allowed in under Public Law 414. Secretarío de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico, Memoria de la Secretaría por el Periodo Comprendido de 1 de Septiembre de 1967 al 31 de Agosto de 1968 (Tlatelolco: Talleres Gráficas de la Nación, 1968), 101.
to the rest of the nation. As such, the bracero program’s importance extends beyond the fields of the Southwest, instead impacting directly on the development of an increasingly globalized model of labor relations.

Guestworker programs developed in the early Twentieth Century in response to growing nativist pressures throughout the world. They replaced the “cooler trade” that had sent indentured servants around the world throughout the Nineteenth Century. The simultaneous rise of welfare states and increased international migration elicited nativist hostility, and a number of nations looked to guestworkers as a potential solution. “For there was an essential fact that separated guestworker from indentured servants: indentured servants were generally encouraged to stay after the expiration of their contracts, while guestworkers were, by definition, expected to leave,” according to Cindy Hahamovitch.

Temporary labor schemes were thus state-brokered compromises designed to maintain high levels of migration while placating anti-immigrant movements. They offered employers foreign workers who could still be bound like indentured servants but who could also be disciplined by the threat of deportation. They placated trade unionists who feared foreign competition by promising to restrict guestworkers to the most onerous work and to expel them during economic downturns. And they assuaged nativists by isolating guestworkers from the general population. Finally, states got development aid from poor countries in the form of ready workers, without the responsibility of having to integrate those workers or provide for their welfare. The perfect immigrant was born.

The lure of guestworkers grew during World War II and its aftermath, as the US joined several European nations and South Africa as habitual users of temporary foreign labor. Long after wartime justifications had passed, these labor

schemes continued to operate as “variations on a theme: each program stabilized (or depressed) wages by enlarging the workforce available to certain target industries.”

Supporters in all of these nations rationalized the programs as the sole source of labor for jobs that native workers would not perform, with South African mine owners repeating a refrain similar to the cotton growers in South Texas. Ignored by these arguments were the implications of creating a managed workforce that lacked the basic rights of free labor.

The voices raised against the Bracero Program in the United States remained lonely voices in the wilderness, seemingly the only ones who cared to notice that the US had ventured down the same path as the apartheid state in South Africa. The comparison made by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO is remarkable as one of the few voices of dissent during the life of the bracero program that considered the global nature of the guestworker phenomenon: “We believe that America deserves a more honorable place in the world community than the Union of South Africa, but at the present time we and South Africa are the only countries on earth which tolerate large-scale alien contract labor programs,” the author asserted, before extending the analogy. “South African mine owners import Negroes from segregated kraals, under contract, and return them home to their kraals when their labor is no longer

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139 Hahamovitch, “Creating Perfect Immigrants,” 84.
140 The report of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor stated, “Beyond wanting migrants to be available when needed and to be gone when not needed, they are expected to work under conditions no longer typical or characteristic of the American standard of life.” President’s Commission, Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, 16.
141 Calavita, Inside the State, 21-22.
needed. Southwest farm owners import Mexicans, under contract, and return them to Mexico when their labor is no longer needed.”

This international backdrop for the bracero program provides only part of the explanation for the existence and longevity of the bracero program, however. The global context existed in tandem with a more localized heritage that applied the labor practices developed in South Texas during the 1910s and 1920s to the rest of the nation. While agricultural and industrial interests in the Midwest and West had contracted thousands of workers from South Texas during the 1920s, creating a small and unregulated version of an international labor system, World War II provided the opportunity to stabilize and nationalize this method of artificially creating a surplus labor pool through international migration. And in the best tradition of Lone Star democracy, political elites helped assure the availability of this excess labor pool at every step, nationalizing the spirit of the Emigrant Agency Law.

Despite growers' constant complaints against it, the Bracero Program witnessed “the most complete coincidence between government intervention and the interests of agribusiness to date.” In the words of Mae Ngai, the essential political aspects of the bracero program “signaled consolidation of industrial farm production as a low-wage enterprise beyond the reach of federal labor standards and workers' rights. In 1955 farm wages in the United States were 36.1 percent of manufacturing wages, a decline from 47.9 percent in 1946. That downward

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trend in large part resulted from the semicolonial use of foreign contract and undocumented laborers—workers who had no legal standing in the society in which they worked."144

With agricultural interests able to dictate how their labor needs were filled, especially during the peak years of the bracero program in the late 1950s when the US had wrested any leverage out of the hands of the Mexican government, they simply recreated the practices of South Texas growers they had long envied and sought to emulate. As Hahamovitch argued in her study of migrant farmworkers on the Atlantic Coast, when guestworker programs (both the bracero and smaller H2) “gave the nation’s growers the power to seek labor from abroad at taxpayers’ expense, Atlantic Coast growers began to employ western methods of labor control.”145 As a result, the fields of the East took on many of the aspects of the fields of South Texas as “farm employers enjoyed a sort of international shape-up, whereby each group of workers was pitted against the others, and if one nation’s workers refused to get on the back of a grower’s truck at the prices offered, another would. Braceros competed against illegal immigrants, West Indians against Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, domestic workers against foreigners generally—all in a race to the bottom.”146

At the most basic level, the labor relations of South Texas had long denied the basic rights of workers. By emulating this model, the bracero program and other guestworker schemes inevitably stripped individuals of the basic rights of movement and choice in the name of cheap labor for the employing country and

144 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 139.
145 Hahamovitch, Fruits of Their Labor, 201.
146 Hahamovitch, H2 Manuscript, Chapter 4, 37-38.
needed income for the sending country. As a result, even though Mexico continually protested against the conditions of the bracero program and the treatment meted out to its citizens, it continued to endure these indignities because, in the words of historian Richard Craig, "its advantages far outweighed its disadvantages. It was the United States who eventually rejected a program that Mexico by necessity accepted." 147 For agricultural workers, Texas became everything south of the Canadian border.

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Ernesto Galarza concluded his analysis of the bracero program by arguing that "the ideal worker" for bracero users and their supporters was "the man of the barracks, the man in a camp who spent all his time under supervision if not under surveillance. . . . Outside the barracks the limits of freedom were prescribed, and they were also the limits of the job. Liberty had found its economic determinant." 148 Likewise, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee declared, "We are convinced that foreign contract labor programs, whatever their announced purpose, by their very nature wreck vast harm upon the general farm labor market. These programs contain inescapable contradictions between purported purpose and practical effect – contradictions which cannot be removed legislatively or administratively." 149

In the decades since these observations the bracero program disappeared from the public consciousness, only to appear again in recent years as a nostrum

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147 Craig, Bracero Program, 23.
148 Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 258.
to solve the “immigration crisis.” “In an era in which governments seem to be racing each other to throw up obstacles to free movement across border,” Hahamovitch has explained, “guestworker programs have been promoted as an alternative to illegal immigration.” Unfortunately, the proponents of such a system seem never to have examined the history of the bracero program. They not only ignore the rampant violations of the spirit and letter of the law that were endemic to the Mexican labor agreement, but they also fail to realize that the bracero program created illegal immigration by intensifying the pressure to emigrate, “institutionalizing migration to the United States as an accepted and expected life experience,” according to Harry Cross and James Sandos. In the place of research and reasoned evaluation of guestworker programs, intellectual sophistry and disingenuous demagoguery have dominated these debates over the current immigration situation. A new bracero program has thus improbably emerged four decades after the original was killed off as a deus ex machina for complicated issues of labor relations and international migration.

150 Hahamovitch, “Creating Perfect Immigrants,” 93.
151 Cross and Sandos, Across the Border, 43.
"Back in the 1950s I wrote a short story in which Mexico gains admittance to the United States, puts all its problems at Washington's feet, and is promptly expelled. The United States has enough troubles of its own without taking on Mexico's. In my story, Mexico is offered its former territories in the Southwest as compensation for its expulsion. It accepts them all — except Texas."

Carlos Fuentes

"I am working on a theory that there may actually be a scientific explanation for why this state is so strange. We know there's helium in the air around Amarillo and lithium in the water in El Paso. In West Texas, the water has so much naturally occurring fluoride that everyone has strong yellow teeth, and it sometimes kills off African violets and goldfish. (This is the subject of Robin Dorsey's semi-famous country song, 'Her Teeth Was Stained but Her Heart Was Pure.') Don't you think it's likely fluoride affects the old psyche as well? Of course, in East Texas, where fluoride is still considered a communist plot, we'll just have to admit that the problem is genetic. And if there's a natural element responsible for South Texas, we probably don't want to know what it is."

Molly Ivins

On October 24, 1966, sixteen men stood across the international bridge that connected Roma, Texas, to Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas. For thirteen hours they remained on the bridge and stopped all traffic at the international boundary. Led by Antonio Orendain, an organizer for the United Farm Workers, they blocked the bridge to keep strikebreakers from crossing the border to work in the fields of Starr County. "That day only seven workers made it to the fields," recalled Orendain, "and three of those swam across the river." When officials in Roma learned of these activities, they tried to arrest Orendain and his men, but "I pointed out to them that they had no authority to do so because we were about three feet inside Mexican territory." Foiled, the police went back to Roma and called the Mexican police to arrest the strikers. When the Mexican police arrived, however, Orendain and his men stepped across to the US side. "We continued

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moving back and forth across the international line until the Texas Rangers got together with the Mexican police and we found ourselves in between both of them,” according to Orendain. “We placed one foot in the United States and one foot in Mexico, but the Mexican police pushed us toward the Rangers and they began arresting us.” Texas Rangers took them to jail, but after their release, “we shut the bridge again, this time by locking these gates at the bridge that were no longer used. This time three of us did the job during the night.”

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While HemisFair was still in its planning stages, an uprising had begun among migrant farm workers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The Texas farm workers’ strike, centered in the border town of Rio Grande City in isolated Starr County, faced local and state opposition far more intense and violent than that experienced in the contemporary farm unionization efforts in California. Like the farmworker movement in California, however, strikers in South Texas sought to take advantage of the end of the bracero program to push for agricultural unionization. With the guest worker program’s potential for strikebreaking gone, activists and workers hoped to realize the minimum rights enjoyed by nonagricultural workers that previous movements in South Texas had failed to achieve.


2 See Tom Miller, On the Border: Portraits of America’s Southwestern Frontier (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981), 27-38. Miller had this to say about Starr County: “When federal officials estimated that fully 30 percent of Starr County’s eighteen thousand residents made their living from contraband, newspapers throughout the country ran the item. Next to the article would be a little map of Texas, with an arrow pointing toward a black splotch in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Starr County was that black splotch upon Texas. Why can’t the press say something nice for a change? Living in a place known for its poverty and smuggling is no fun.” (Page 27)
In 1966 the wages paid to farm workers in the Rio Grande Valley varied from forty cents an hour to eighty-five cents an hour. Eugene Nelson, a United Farm Worker organizer, was sent to Texas in early 1966 by Cesar Chavez. He established a union organization among local melon pickers, and they planned to strike before the harvest began in the summer of 1966. The primary target was La Casita farms, referred to by the strikers as the "General Motors of Valley agribusiness." The strikers' only demands were a minimum wage of $1.25 and the right to organize. One of the first actions, on June 8, 1966, was the establishment of a picket line along the international bridge at Roma. Nelson and others stood along the side of the bridge, careful not to obstruct traffic, and tried to convince workers crossing the border not to take jobs in the fields of Starr County. They were all arrested by Starr County Deputies and taken to the county courthouse. Once there, the County Attorney informed Nelson that, in addition to charges of illegal picketing, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was also investigating a supposed plot by strikers to blow up the courthouse and trucks used to transport strikebreakers to the fields. Throughout the strike, similarly fabricated charges were used to deny bail and tie up the strike leadership in endless litigation.

Things then went from bad to worse with the arrival of the Texas Rangers. The Rangers slid easily into the pattern of official harassment begun by local law enforcement. Hundreds of strikers and strike sympathizers were arrested for such

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5 By comparison, the growers struck by the UFW in California paid around $1.25 an hour.
egregious violations as obstructing a bridge, secondary picketing, mass picketing, using loud and vociferous language, and "disturbing the janitor in performance of his duties." Local law enforcement and the Texas Rangers tried to break up a number of picket lines by offering strikers jobs for $1.25 an hour (the wage sought by the union) to work for La Casita. Strikers and union officials were also continuously threatened with physical violence. One union member, Magdalone Dimas, was arrested and beaten on three separate occasions. The last instance ended with Dimas in the hospital with a concussion and spinal trauma after he was savagely beaten with the butt of a shotgun by Ranger Captain A.Y. Allee, a veteran of Ranger crackdowns on Depression-era organizing campaigns.

The UFW leadership in California sent Orendain in late September 1966 to reenergize the strike effort after it began to wane in the face of unmitigated official hostility. When he arrived, he found that the local strikers resented the imposition of new leadership from California. One striker, Librado de la Cruz, confronted Orendain shortly after his arrival in Starr County: "You haven't done nothing in Texas. Besides, you don't believe in violence, and here we are preparing ourselves to do something stronger than has been done in California." Orendain found that the Texas farmworkers had collected a small arsenal of guns and dynamite to defend themselves against the Texas Rangers and local sheriff's

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9 "Boycott of La Casita Begins as Ranch Foreman Shoots at Picket," Farm Worker Newsletter #7, United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections. See also "List of Union Member Arrests from June 1, 1966 to June 1, 1967 in Hidalgo and Starr Counties." Texas Labor Archives, UTA Special Collections.


11 Quoted by Orendain in Martinez, Border People, 228.
deputies. They rejected nonviolence, and instead pushed Orendain toward a more confrontational strategy.

The efforts to keep strikebreakers from crossing the international bridge emerged from this local initiative, not from the directives of the UFW leadership in California. Cesar Chavez arrived in Starr County in late October 1966, shortly after Orendain’s protest on the bridge, and complained to Orendain, “I sent you to Texas to organize workers, not inmates. You’re in jail all the time.”  

A few days later, on November 3, 1966, strikers stopped a train filled with green chiles as it left Rio Grande City. “We convinced the engineers to respect the picket line,” recalled Orendain. “That was about 6 P.M. By 10 P.M. we heard that the Texas Rangers were on the way. They arrived an hour or two later with machine guns and accompanied by engineers from the railroad company.” When they tried to move the train, however, they discovered that a nearby bridge had burned. Orendain and the entire union leadership were again arrested.

The strike continued until early 1967 when Cesar Chavez pulled Orendain, and almost all financial support, back to California because it was too violent in Starr County. The UFW had been successful in California largely through boycott activities. Their accomplishments came from their ability to construct a network of urban sympathizers throughout the nation, rather than any ability to keep workers out of the fields. The national media failed to take notice of the strike in Texas, however, which made a successful boycott difficult. In addition,

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12 Quoted by Orendain in Ibid., 230.
13 Orendain in Ibid.
14 Orendain in Ibid., 231. After breaking with Chavez and the UFW leadership, Orendain returned to South Texas a few years later and founded the Texas Farm Workers Association.
the workers of South Texas implicitly rejected Chavez's nonviolent philosophy and were determined to confront the growers of the Rio Grande Valley directly. Rather than accede control of UFW activities and funds to the local leadership in South Texas, Chavez and the California leadership simply pulled their support. The remaining activists and strikers in South Texas tried to reenergize the strike in May 1967 before the next harvest began, but by that time the efforts of law enforcement and local courts to crush the farmworkers movement had drained the local union of funds. By the end of June 1967 the strike had folded, snuffed out through the same means as the strikes of the 1930s.15

Focusing on the ability of the UFW to sustain an agricultural strike in California, Philip Martin argued that the years after the end of the bracero program represented a “golden era” of agricultural unionism.16 “In the virtuous cycle that developed in the 1960s and 1970s,” claims Martin, “there were relatively few immigrant strike breakers, and growers proved that they could raise wages and introduce fringe benefits to get seasonal workers.”17 This golden age disappeared in the 1980s, according to Martin, but he clearly points toward a brief period in which farmworkers wielded unprecedented leverage in their relations with growers. While such a situation may have existed in California or the

17 Ibid., 192.
Midwest, the farmworkers of South Texas saw no "golden era." The growers and their allies in law enforcement saw to that. Instead, conditions in the fields and in the migrant stream remained much the same after the Bracero Program ended. For the farmworkers of South Texas, the so-called "golden era" looked a lot like the old days.

The condition of Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers in South Texas changed little from the beginning of the farm boom in the 1910s until the post-Bracero era. From the beginning of large-scale migration from Mexico during the Revolution, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were viewed by potential employers as a never-ending supply of labor power, more beasts of burden than citizens. This system was merely amplified over the next several decades, even as massive economic and political changes occurred in both nations. Temporary shifts in migration flows, immigration legislation, and demographic changes may have altered some of the specifics of these trends, but have not changed their broad outlines. Migrants have continued to flow from northern Mexico to South Texas and the rest of the United States, while employers have continued to formulate countless methods to put these migrants to work. If anything, migration flows have only increased in the years since the end of the Bracero Program, with little thought or energy given to improving the treatment meted out to these migrants. 18

Underlying this continuity is the fact that farm labor has remained completely outside of the realm of normal labor relations, even during the "golden

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age.” When farmworker issues have come to the attention of the general public, such as during the Great Depression and the years of UFW activities in California, they have been treated as issues of poverty. The New Deal and Great Society dealt with them through temporary relief programs, but did nothing to attack the roots of the problem. They dispensed some money, spoke solemnly about rural poverty, passed some legislation, but then forgot about the farmworkers who continued to travel along the migrant circuit year after year. This shameful bait-and-switch, with the rightful protections of labor rights and civil rights replaced by the bland rhetoric of alleviating rural poverty, has continued to the present day. Even when the public has paid attention to the plight of farmworkers, issues of labor supply have always taken precedence as politicians bend over backwards to appease agribusiness interests.19

Rather than trying to solve these problems, however, current political leaders have responded to these conditions by resuscitating two relics of the Cold War era: a revamped bracero program and a Berlin-style wall along the US-Mexico border. As I write, both are still in the planning stages. Both Republicans and Democrats seem intent on responding to the supposed “immigration crisis” by resuscitating ideas that were relegated to the dustbin of history just a few years ago. The renewed bracero program and the border wall have emerged as twin responses to the new nativism – one allows some Mexicans in temporarily for their labor power, and the other shows Mexico that its citizens are not welcome as permanent residents of the United States. A new bracero program “would

represent governmental acceptance that farmers will normally reach outside U.S. borders for workers," according to Philip Martin, "continuing agricultural exceptionalism."\textsuperscript{20} A border wall carries a much more ominous meaning, however. Michael Chertoff, Secretary of Homeland Security, has said that the border wall has "symbolic value . . . (but) the idea that you are going to solve the problem simply by building a fence is undercut by the fact that yesterday we discovered a tunnel."\textsuperscript{21} In other words, Chertoff admits that a wall cannot stop unauthorized immigration. But it will tie the stigma of illegal migration even more tightly to Mexican and Mexican American communities throughout the United States, reiterating in symbolic form the idea that immigrants from south of the border lack the capacity for full citizenship and represent a threat to the nation.

Looked at together, a new guest worker program and the rise of a border wall represent nothing less than a denial that Mexico and its citizens are anything more than potential producers and consumers to be exploited by the United States economy. Their goods, capital, and labor power are welcome in the United States, but the people must remain permanently south of the border. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security has taken advantage of an article tacked on to the REAL ID Act of 2005 that gives the Secretary of Homeland Security the power to waive all laws that might slow down the construction of a border wall, while also specifically limiting the ability of the courts to challenge this

\textsuperscript{20} Martin, Promise Unfulfilled, 191.
consolidation of control in the executive branch. While this abdication of legislative control is blatantly unconstitutional, it provides the opening through which the wall can be built. For now, the path toward the construction of this monument to exclusion seems open.

The appearance of a wall along the border or a guest worker program will do nothing to answer the larger problems of the US-Mexico border region, however. A wall will merely provide a temporary political nostrum, built on nativist mania, for a far more complex series of issues. Migration will not stop. Criminalizing it will only drive immigrants further into the shadows. Reasoned consideration of issues of citizenship and civil rights will disappear, and the notion of a “confluence of civilizations” along the US-Mexico border will be reduced to a quaint notion from a long-dead past.

Only rigid enforcement of civil rights and labor laws can improve this situation. Hopefully, this latest wave of nativism will recede as all others have, but the disappearance of overt racism is just a beginning. Only when the civil rights of all workers, regardless of citizenship or country of origin, are honored can South Texas, the US-Mexico border region, and the United States as a whole avoid repeating the history of labor repression and racial segregation in South Texas.

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