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25.6 Mexican Immigrants

Soldiers were shooting all around. A flying bullet almost hit him. That was when Pablo Mares decided he had to get out of Mexico. “I had to come to the United States,” he said later, “because it was impossible to live down there with so many revolutions.”

Mares had been caught in the middle of a bloody civil war. The conflict began when Mexico’s president allowed wealthy landowners to take over the lands of 6 million Indians and 8 million poor farmers. In 1910, landless farmers rebelled, breaking up large landholdings and giving the land to poor families. In response, soldiers attacked villages, killing thousands of peasants.

Crossing the Border The Mexican Revolution dragged on for ten terrible years. Between 1910 and 1920, about 500,000 Mexicans entered the United States. They entered freely, without **passports** or money.

Many Mexicans walked hundreds of miles to reach the border, carrying all they owned on their backs. In just one day, a Texas reporter saw “hundreds of Mexicans, all journeying northward on foot, on burroback and in primitive two-wheel carts.” Others traveled north by rail. By 1900, railroad lines connected American and Mexican cities. Railroads provided both transportation and jobs for Mexican immigrants. One Mexican newspaper reported, “There is not a day in which passenger trains do not leave for the border, full of Mexican men who are going in gangs to work on railroad lines in the United States.”

Mexicans in America Many American employers welcomed the Mexicans. Expanding railroads and large-scale farms and ranches in the Southwest depended on laborers who were willing to work hard for little pay. After Congress banned Chinese immigration in 1882, these employers looked to Mexico for new workers. “Where I came from,” said one Mexican construction worker, “I used to work ten hours for \$1.25.... Then I came here and they paid \$1.25 for eight hours—it was good.”

passport: a document issued by a citizen’s home government that identifies a person and permits him or her to travel to other countries

Some Mexican immigrants found jobs with railroads, mines, factories, and canneries. But most found work in agriculture. Mexican farmworkers moved from region to region, harvesting crops as they ripened. They picked oranges in southern California, almonds in central California, and then apples in Oregon. They harvested cotton in Texas and Arizona, and then moved on to sugar beets in Colorado.

Farmwork paid very little. One Texas farmer said, “I was paying Pancho and his whole family 60 cents a day.... He worked from sun to sun.” Children worked in the fields beside their parents to help support their families. Few of these children had a chance to attend school.

Farmworkers often lived in camps that they built near the fields. “Shelters were made of almost every conceivable thing—burlap, canvas, palm branches,” said one visitor. Some farms and ranches provided housing for their workers. Either way, these temporary homes usually lacked running water and basic sanitation.

After harvest season, farmworkers sometimes moved to nearby towns. *Barrios*, or Mexican neighborhoods, sprang up on the edges of cities near such farming areas as Los Angeles, California, and San Antonio, Texas. Food stands and grocery stores in the *barrio* offered familiar tastes and smells. Residents helped each other take care of the sick and find jobs. On Mexican religious holidays, Catholic churches held special ceremonies. On those days, the *barrio* was filled with singing, dancing, and fireworks.

Many Mexican immigrants originally planned to return to Mexico once the revolution was over. Whites who believed that Mexicans were taking their jobs encouraged such returns. One wrote, “I wish the Mexicans could be put back in their country.”

Mexicans who remained in the United States often faced strong prejudice. Compared to whites, they earned very low wages, and they had little say in their working conditions. In schools, white children were sometimes taught to “boss” their Mexican classmates, as they were expected to do when they grew up.

Despite these problems, many Mexican immigrants chose to stay. Like *Isidro Osorio*, a farm and railroad worker, they hoped for a better future in their new homeland. “I have worked very hard to earn my \$4.00 a day,” reported Osorio. “That is why I want to give a little schooling to my children so that they won’t stay like I am.”



Some Mexicans, such as those in this photograph, found jobs in mines. Most, however, were employed as agricultural workers.