

GREAT DEPRESSION: ILLEGAL DEPORTATIONS OR DEPORTATIONS OF ILLEGALS?

By John S. Caragozian

During the Great Depression, the United States used various tactics – some unconstitutional or coercive – to deport or “encourage” the out-migration of Mexican Americans. As a result, the U.S. lost over one-third of its Mexican American population, most of them American citizens. California was the epicenter.

In the early 1900s, Congress increasingly restricted immigration into the U.S. By 1924, quotas applied to most countries outside the Western Hemisphere. Separately, severe economic disruption plagued Mexico after the 1910 revolution, with millions of rural and urban residents unable to earn a living. As a result, increasing numbers of immigrants from Mexico provided much of America’s cheap labor.

Some immigrants settled in the U.S. and raised families. Others came only for seasonal work and then returned home. Geographical proximity, casual (or non-existent) immigration and employment paperwork, and lack of a border patrol facilitated this back and forth.

Beginning in 1929, the Great Depression greatly impacted Mexican Americans. Many were the first to lose their jobs as the nation’s economy began to collapse. As conditions worsened, federal and local officials believed that ridding the U.S. of Mexican Americans would (a) provide job opportunities for “real” Americans and (b) reduce government expenses by dropping Mexican Americans from welfare rolls. See Francisco Balderrama & Raymond Rodriguez, “Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s,” 67 (rev. ed. 2006); Abraham Hoffman, “Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939,” 86 (1974).

The U.S. adopted a twofold strategy. First, the U.S. used or abused immigration laws. For example, in 1930, the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Immigration – later to become the Immigration and Naturalization Service under the Department of Justice – started to deny visas to “common laborers” unless they could prove prior U.S. residency. By 1931, the number of issued visas plummeted by 94%, though actual immigration without visas is unknown. See, e.g., Hoffman, *supra* at 31-33.

Moreover, the Bureau of Immigration began deporting Mexican Americans who could not prove their legal status. In 1931, for example, Bureau agents, with assistance from the Los Angeles Police Department, raided L.A.’s old plaza and arrested people unable to prove their citizenship. Separately, Bureau agents without warrants went door to door in southern

California's Mexican American neighborhoods, arresting and jailing people unable to show proof of legal residency. *Id.*, at 59; Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra*, at 71.

The City of Los Angeles sought "all publicity possible" regarding arrests as a "psychological gesture" to scare other aliens, including Mexican and Japanese Americans, into agreeing to voluntary deportations.

Those arrested were often denied counsel, even if they could afford it. Using threats of imprisonment and permanent expulsion from the U.S., the Bureau urged arrestees to agree to voluntary deportation, which, at least theoretically, might allow future return. The threats worked: a paucity of actual warrants – perhaps 400 – gave rise to tens of thousands of "voluntary" deportations. *See, e.g.*, Hoffman, *supra* at 43-44, 77-79; Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 64.

President Herbert Hoover saw possible political advantage with deportations. In particular, he hoped to blunt organized labor's opposition to him by appeasing the American Federation of Labor and other unions that favored deportations as a means of providing jobs for union members. Hoffman, *supra* at 29-30.

Some officials, however, expressed concern about the legality of involuntary and "voluntary" deportations. Bureau brass in Washington, D.C. expressed concern about whether local agents were following the law. The Los Angeles County Bar Association also publicly expressed concern about possible illegality. *Id.*, 65-66, 74-75.

The private sector was concerned, too, albeit for less than altruistic reasons. California employers worried about loss of cheap labor. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce worried that deportations would create adverse publicity in advance of the 1932 Olympics in L.A. Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 145-46; Hoffman, *supra* at 70-73. By the mid-1930s, deportations ebbed.

The second strategy for ridding the U.S. of Mexican Americans was "voluntary" repatriation. In the 1930s, local officials urged Mexican Americans, including U.S.-born citizens, to "return" to Mexico. The officials' pitch contained a carrot: fares for vehicle, boat, or, most often, railroad transportation into Mexico were wholly or partially paid by local charities or local governments (some of which, in turn, received federal reimbursement). *See* Alex Wagner, "America's Forgotten History of Illegal Deportations," *The Atlantic*, Mar. 6. 2017.

The stick included (a) the threat (sometimes baseless) to aliens of losing public assistance and public employment and (b) the reality for citizens and aliens alike of bleak economic prospects and continued segregation and other discrimination in the U.S. A disturbing example of

discrimination was in Los Angeles County, where Anglo families received welfare of \$30 per month, but Mexican American families received only \$20, the rationale being that Mexican Americans had a lower standard of living and could survive on less. Hoffman, *supra* at 83-84; Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 95.

In addition, Mexico welcomed Mexican Americans. Mexico wanted settlers, especially skilled ones, to improve agricultural and industrial productivity, with a goal of creating a middle class. Mexican consuls and other officials spoke to persons of Mexican ancestry in the U.S. and emphasized that, after the 1910 revolution, Mexico was committed to social justice and land reform. Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 159. More practically, Mexico offered repatriates duty-free importation of household goods and agricultural equipment, plus free or subsidized land and supplies in new agricultural colonies (often with a promise of future irrigation).

These two strategies – deportation and repatriation – resulted in a total of perhaps a million or more persons of Mexican ancestry leaving the U.S. for Mexico during the Great Depression. *E.g.*, *id.* at 151, 159.

Unfortunately, all of this movement was for naught. In the U.S., no jobs opened for citizens. Indeed, evidence suggests that areas with higher-than-average repatriation rates had lower employment rates. Jongkwan Lee, et al., “The Employment Effects of Mexican Repatriations: Evidence from the 1930s,” National Bureau of Economic Research (2017).

Localities may have slightly reduced their welfare spending in the short term. In the long term, however, some welfare rolls may have increased if, for example, a Mexican American breadwinner’s deportation could result in the remaining family going on welfare. *See* Hoffman, *supra* at 114; Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 77, 159.

As for Mexico, the agricultural projects failed. The colonies’ lands were poor, and promised irrigation and other assistance never came. Domestic politics also played a part as some Mexican citizens resented government spending on newcomers who may have previously “deserted” Mexico. Fundamentally, Mexico lacked the resources to support a million deportees and repatriates, many penniless or unskilled.

Most important, deported and repatriated Mexican Americans – especially ones who had lived in the U.S. for decades – had their lives upended. Families were separated, individuals lost businesses and property, children’s education was disrupted, and a majority were relocated to an unfamiliar country (Mexico). In sum, the upheaval traumatized the Mexican American community.

Evidence suggests that later in the 1930s and '40s, a majority of repatriates and many deportees returned to the U.S. See Carey McWilliams, "Southern California Country: An Island on the Land," 317 (1946); Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 258. Some returned because of poverty in Mexico. Some returns resulted from improving economic and legal conditions in the U.S., including President Franklin Roosevelt's executive order barring racial or citizenship discrimination by defense contractors. Other Mexican Americans may have simply wanted to reunite with family, friends and employers. See Hoffman, *supra* at 107, 150-51.

Still, some Mexican Americans were unable to return because their U.S. departure cards indicated that they had previously received welfare, and federal immigration law empowered the Bureau to refuse admission to immigrants "liable to become a public charge." Sometimes, the Bureau arbitrarily denied re-entry to U.S. citizens. See, *e.g.*, *id.*, at 91; Balderrama & Rodriguez, *supra* at 258.

Ironically, World War II's manpower demands resulted in the U.S. military and private employers recruiting the very same Mexican Americans who had been so unwelcomed less than a decade earlier.

Lest we think of these events as ancient history, some of our fellow Californians – living, but now elderly – endured and still recall the bad old days of Great Depression deportations and repatriations.

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