

Mexican Americans *1848-1940's*



<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-22389483>

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April 19, 2017
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Spring 2017
Seminar3_Historypaper

The history of the Mexican-Americans does not begin with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that was signed in 1848. Mexican-Americans didn't cross the border; rather, the border crossed them. After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexican Americans in the Southwest territory faced many economical, social and political changes. In order to understand the relationship between Mexico and the United States and the way Mexican Americans have been treated it's extremely important to understand the historical events prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe.

In the 1500's, Hernán Cortés invaded and conquered Mexico. As a result of the conquest, a divided society was created. During the colonial period many indígenas (indigenous), some willingly and others by force, assimilated a new culture, religion and language. Society was divided into the ricos (rich) and the pobres (poor). The upper class was composed Creoles and the lower class of the (Mestizos, Indigenous and slaves). People were classified depending on their skin color under "Las Castas de la Raza". The Spaniards were on top of the pyramid followed by the creoles, the mestizos, the mulatos (person of white and black race), indigenous, blacks and slaves were at the bottom.

One of the internal causes of fighting for the independence of Mexico was that the Spaniards had many privileges and the sense of identity. Under the leadership of the priest Miguel Hidalgo and



Costilla, Mexicans started to fight to no longer be ruled by Spain. In September 15 of 1810, in the small town of Dolores, Miguel Hidalgo, did the “Grito de Dolores” (Cry from Dolores), which started the fight for independence. It took eleven long years and in 1821, Mexico gained its independence from Spain with “El Plan de Iguala”, written by José María Morales, a mestizo priest that took leadership on the fight for independence after Hidalgo’s death. The Plan de Iguala was composed of 23 articles. The three guarantees of the plan stated that Mexico to become constitutional monarchy, Roman Catholic religion would be given monopoly over the spiritual life of the country and Criollos and peninsulares (Spaniards) would be treated equally.

After Mexico became independent, its government was left with massive territory and political crisis. Iturbide’s government decided to regulate



immigration to its northwestern territory and allowed more than 300 Anglo families to settle in Mexican territory. Shortly after that, more Anglo families began entering the territory without regulation. In the meantime, the United States was a young country that was technologically advanced and with a hunger for expansion due to the Manifest Destiny ideology. Mexico had exactly what the United States wanted and in 1846, President James K. Polk seized the opportunity to declare war on Mexico. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was what concluded the war. As a result, Mexico lost more than half of its territory under the rule of President Santa Anna. The Mexicanos that resided in the Southwest territory had the option to either move south or become American citizens. Immediately after the war Anglo-Americans started to challenge Mexicanos for the control of the land. Mexican Ranchers were required to provide proof of ownership of their land. Many were then surrendered to Anglo mainly due to high costs of attorneys in defense due to the lack of evidence of ownership. As a consequence, many were forced to relinquish the ownership of their properties to Anglos despite the fact that under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo they were allowed to retain their properties.

The territorial exchange had long-term effects on both countries. As a result of the Treaty the United States was able to expand from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. And most importantly, it provided abundance of lands, minerals and natural resources for a young growing country. At the same time it produced the debates about extending slavery. After the annexation of the territory, Mexicanos

and other minority groups, have been subjected to legalize discrimination through radicalized labor and segregation. For example many primarily work in cleaning, farming or other labor-intensive jobs in service for white Anglos, work for minimum wage or less.

In Mexico, the lost of the territory challenged the government to revive the country. Mexico suffered foreign interventions, a period of turmoil and a civil war.

But it also inspired the country's leaders with the mentality to avoid additional humiliation and the era of La Reforma started with the Plan de Ayutla". It was a long struggle between liberals and



conservatives a fight where the liberals under Benito Juarez leadership to force out foreign invaders such as French and established the foundations of a democratic state in the 1857 Constitution.

“The dominant theme of Mexican American History in the twentieth century was migration” (Gonzales 2009). During the first three decades of the century massive migration of Mexicanos took place. The immigrants of this period entered illegally through the United States. The majority settled in the Southwest and the “most attractive destination was Texas, whose Mexican population increased from 71,062 in 1900 to 683,681 in 1930” (Gonzales 2009). Mexicanos were migrating because the United States provided the best employment opportunities.

Many jobs were found in mines and farm labor. The agricultural field expanded providing a wide variety of crops such as cotton. Mexicanos were driven out of their country and attracted to the Southwest for political, religious and economic reasons.

“Anti-Mexican Sentiment was pronounced wherever Mexicanos went” (Gonzales, 2009). Mexicanos faced many injustices from the dominant society. They faced language barrier and



ignorance of their legal rights and as a result, many Mexicanos were forced to endure indignities in silence.

The Depression period 1930-1940, was a decade of economic hardship for the nation. American population including Mexicanos suffered from the shirking job market during the depression. Life was extremely difficult during the Depression period for the Mexicano barrios; many lived in poverty and faced many other problems such as overcrowded housing that resulted in sanitation deficiency. Many Mexicans living in the nation during the Depression returned to Mexico but not all repatriations were voluntary. Children of immigrants, were often denied the option to stay in the country when their parents were deported.

Mexicanos suffered the humiliation of deportation and many others were subjected to intense discrimination.

The participation of Mexicanos in World War II was very high. “Most Mexicanos were drafted into the service” (Gonzales 2009). Mexicanos saw the military as an escape of the type of life they were living. It was an opportunity to to improve their low socioeconomic status. According to Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, “Many Mexican-American families had two, three, four - and even, in the case of

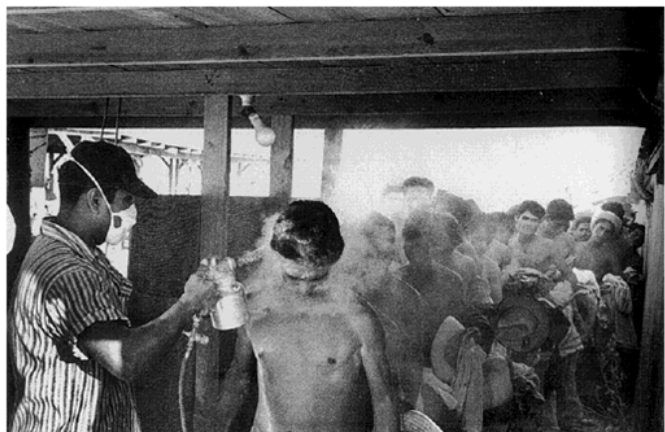


the De Los Santos brothers of San Saba, eight - sons in the military during World War II”. Mexicanos served with distinction, they won scores of metals, including the most prestigious military citation of all, the Congressional Medal of Honor. This medal was first established in 1861 for valor and around thirty four

hundred individuals have been awarded the Medal of Honor. “During World War II, twelve Hispanics, apparently all of them Mexicanos, were bestowed this coveted honor: Luciano Adams, Macario García, Silvestre S. Herrera, José M. López, Cleto L. Rodriguez, Harold Gonsalves, David M. Gonzales, Ysmael R. Villegas, José P. Martínez, Alejandro R. Ruiz, José F. Valdez, and Manuel Pérez Jr” (Gonzales, 2009).

During the war, many Mexicanos moved to the cities because the best jobs were found there and slowly they started to improve their standard of living. However, the families suffered from discrimination, the lack of economic opportunities, deficient housing, and segregated schools. Many Mexicano familia began to experience domestic violence, alcoholism, abandonment, and divorce. “The advent of *pachuco* gangs in the early 1940s mirrors the breakdown of the traditionally family, as well as the discrimination experienced by Mexicano youths in an urban environment” (Gonzales 2009). Pachucos also known as zoot-suiters were youths who represented a unique subculture in the Mexican community who wore a distinctive uniform. As form of rebellion, the Pachucos created their own self-contained society.

During and after the war, the United States government sponsored the Bracero Program, which recruited Mexicans to work temporary in the western United States due to the American’s labor need. Most of the braceros worked in the agricultural field. “Thanks to this binational agreement, some quarter of a million Mexican nationals, all of them male, were employed as braceros throughout the West” (Gonzales 2009). My grandfather was a bracero and I recall many stories he told me about his



experience in the United States as a bracero. He explained to me that everytime he

crossed to the United States as a bracero, he was humiliated with an intense inspection. He was placed in a room with other braceros, where they were forced to take off their clothes and subject to an intense inspection. They were checked and fumigated to make sure he didn't bring any diseases to the United States. My grandfather said to me "Me sentía como un animal cochino" (I felt like a dirty animal).

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought to Mexicanos political, economic, and social changes. Despite the discrimination Mexican Americans faced after the treaty, they demonstrated their bravery and loyalty to the nation during World War II and they were and continue to be important aspects of the nation's economic growth. Thanks to the Mexicano hard working class the American society continues to have food on their table.

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