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Invisible Borders: Repatriation and Colonization of Mexican Migrant Workers along the California Borderlands during the 1930s

By Benny J. Andrés Jr.

The Mexican peon does not settle; he comes and earns something and goes back.

— Harry Chandler, Colorado River Land Company, Mexicali, Baja California, 1930¹

In December 1934, two weeks after the presidential election of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico’s twentieth-century champion of agrarian and working-class reform, the first tremor in a seismic shift rumbled through the California-Baja California borderlands. Joe Herrera, editor of La Gaceta del Valle Imperial, wrote a rare and unprecedented article for his parent newspaper The Brawley News, reporting on the voluntary repatriation of 175 Mexican families from Corcoran, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, Santa Paula, Calipatria, and other areas in California. The Mexican government had arranged for 700 colonists to settle on 6,700 acres in a farm cooperative directly across the border in Baja California’s Mexicali Valley. The repatriation caravan, consisting of 152 persons, was the advance party.²

The caravan stopped in Brawley, the center of the irrigated desert agricultural region, to pick up additional colonists eager to return to Mexico for better opportunity. There the repatriates shared food and supplies, while the group’s orchestra entertained the “jolly crowd” with music. Most of the participants had saved thousands of dollars. “We do not want any help. We have already arranged everything about the land,” remarked the group’s leader. The Mexican consul in Calexico (the American town adjacent to Mexicali, capital of the northern Baja California territory) had their repatriation papers in order. Herrera served up a subtle warning to American agribusiness for cracking down harshly on Mexicans during labor strikes that year: “They are glad to go back to their homeland.”³

The convoy’s journey across the international line to establish a farm commune in the Mexicali Valley is part of a larger story about the ways in which Mexican migrants on the California-Baja California borderland navigated rapidly changing economic and political conditions during the Great Depression. Mobile workers on the U.S. side of the international border strove to improve their lives through migration, strikes, and voluntary repatriation to Mexico. Legal and illegal residents used the services of mutualistas (benevolent

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³ The Mexican peon does not settle; he comes and earns something and goes back.
societies) to forestall deportation and forced repatriation for receiving public assistance. Across the border in the Mexicali Valley, workers used xenophobic arguments to persuade the Mexican government to force out Asian competitors, deploying nationalist rhetoric steeped in the Mexican Revolution’s ideology to justify demands for their government to expropriate land owned by foreigners and redistribute it to Mexicans.4

Historians have narrowly interpreted Mexican repatriation during the 1930s through an immigration/citizenship framework, whereby “repatriation” means forced expulsion from the United States. This perspective confuses immigration for permanent settlement with the act of temporary migration. Indeed, only a small percentage of Mexicans intended to become U.S. citizens, as reflected in the naturalization records.5 Circular movement across the international line was not only a rejection of American citizenship; one could argue that the regularity and repetition of this pattern rendered the border invisible. The immigration/citizenship focus also ignores the Mexican government’s response to the brutal treatment of its citizens in the United States.6 This rigid nation-state model has straitjacketed American scholars, preventing deeper consideration of ethnic Mexicans’ repatriation to their native land.7

With very few exceptions, for the past seventy-six years historians have followed a narrative similar to that presented in Carey McWilliams’s 1935 Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California, which only briefly relates the callous actions of U.S. welfare and immigration officials in forcibly repatriating ethnic Mexicans during the Great Depression.8 The standard interpretation of repatriation in this era is that city and county welfare agencies worked in conjunction with the U.S. Border Patrol to expel ethnic Mexicans who received public aid in violation of current immigration law. This accepted narrative, however, does not explain what transpired in the Imperial Valley, where the failure of farm workers’ strikes and an influx of competitors for their jobs—not county efforts to reduce public assistance—prompted the valley’s Mexican workers to voluntarily repatriate.

The north-south framework presented in Factories in the Field is also inaccurate. In actuality, Mexican migrants followed irregular, often circular paths.9 Mexican border crossers were migrants rather than immigrants, traversing familiar transnational and domestic circuits.10 Another flaw in the repatriation paradigm is its chronicle of a great injustice done to a powerless people. Rather, the agency of Mexican repatriates in battling to secure fair wages and improving working conditions is a more accurate account. For campesinos (field workers) in the Imperial Valley, migration, mutualistas, strikes, and repatriation were all viable strategies for economic survival.

This article offers a new interpretation of Mexican repatriation, weaving together the body of scholarship on farm workers’ activities in the Imperial Valley during the 1930s with published Spanish-language sources of the “Mexicanization” of Mexicali by repatriates to demonstrate how their strategies for improved labor conditions empowered them to significantly change transborder migration patterns. The Mexican government’s active involvement in repatriation and colonization of its northern borderlands under President Cárdenas, and its coordination with the U.S. Border Patrol, established the working relationship for the binational labor agreement known as the Bracero Program (1942–64).11

ROOTS OF REPATRIATION

Mexican officials routinely attempted to prevent migration to the United States, especially after the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924 and during the massive forced repatriation efforts by the U.S. government in the 1930s.12 During the early years of the Great Depression, Mexico
struggled to resettle its repatriated and deported citizens. Unlike his predecessors, Cárdenas’s administration (1934–40) developed a settlement program in agricultural communities along the borderlands,15 vigorously encouraging repatriation to populate and economically develop the Mexicali Valley. In 1937, when Cárdenas expropriated the vast landholdings of the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC)—a Los Angeles-based syndicate headed by the owner of the Los Angeles Times—thousands of Mexicans escaped a hard-scrabble life by flocking to the Mexicali Valley. Consequently, the harsh treatment of Mexican nationals during the Great Depression played into Mexico’s long-term objective to build up its northern borderlands, regain its citizens living in the United States, and give repatriates a fresh start as small farmers.

The Imperial-Mexicali Valley, an agricultural cornucopia nourished by the Colorado River, was located at the intersection of California, Arizona, Sonora, and Baja California. This 1927 map, published by the Boulder Dam Association, shows the region with the proposed 82-mile-long All-American Canal—an irrigation network connecting the Imperial and Coachella Valleys with the Colorado River. Running parallel to the Mexico-California border, its completion in 1940 propelled the growth of the Imperial Valley’s agricultural industry.

Courtesy of the author
Local newspapers such as The Brawley News and the Calexico Chronicle provide extensive details of this transnational history. Yet these two media outlets catered to distinct constituencies and perspectives. The Brawley News, an agribusiness organ, hewed a conservative, anti-field labor, anti-Mexican, Republican viewpoint. In contrast, the Calexico Chronicle was the mouthpiece for Calexico's merchants who owed their existence to commerce and crossborder tourism in Mexicali. With its pro-Mexican perspective, the Calexico Chronicle closely reported both nations' border-enforcement activities, as well as news from Mexicali, major events in Mexico, and agriculture in the Mexicali Valley, particularly regarding the CRLC, which owned most of the land in the Mexicali Valley (over 800,000 acres) and which purchased its food and supplies across the border in Calexico. The CRLC shipped its products by train through Calexico, since the Mexicali Valley had no land transportation link to the Mexican interior. Calexico's dependence on the CRLC's trade explains why the Calexico Chronicle closely followed Mexican repatriation to the Mexicali Valley.

The repatriation story dates to colonization of this arid region for agribusiness in 1900, when the isolated Imperial-Mexicali Valley was sustained by a canal that brought water from the Colorado River. World War I demand for farm products transformed the region on both sides of the international line into a cotton mecca, requiring an abundance of seasonal pickers. In 1920, a scarcity of pickers prompted Imperial Valley farmers to join Arizona cotton growers in forming a labor-recruitment organization—the first time large numbers of Mexican migrants were brought to the area. From this point on, the valley's farmers were among the staunchest supporters of an open border for campesino migrants. After the war, farmers diversified into labor-intensive crops and relied primarily on mobile Mexican workers. Supported by police and judges, they suppressed field unions and crushed strikes. In the Mexicali Valley, the CRLC raised cattle and grew cotton. The company hired Chinese tenants and imported Chinese cotton pickers in order to discourage Mexican settlement and demand for land. Its exclusion of Mexicans ended during the United States' post–World War I economic recession. Across the border in the Imperial Valley, farmers had promised U.S. immigration officials that they would send imported Mexicans on contract back to Mexico after the cotton harvest. But bankrupted by the recession, they did not have the money to return the campesinos. Stranded Mexicans drifted into the Mexicali Valley, squatted on CRLC land, and petitioned the governor of the northern territory of Baja California for jobs.

Campesinos faced a formidable opponent. Territorial military governors funded their governments by taxing foreign landowners. They frequently sent soldiers to break up strikes and land disputes. In 1921, the Mexican government responded to anti-Chinese violence on the northern borderlands by banning the entry of Chinese laborers. In November 1925, officials in Mexicali announced strict enforcement of a law requiring that half of all paid workers had to be Mexicans. Mexico's ban on imported Chinese workers spurred the CRLC to bring workers from Sinaloa and Sonora. Between 1921 and 1924, 13,000 Mexicans arrived in Mexicali, but they did not linger there long when Americans induced them with higher wages to cross the line. Thus, the CRLC supported and sustained the circular migration corridor from western Mexico to the Mexicali Valley and into the United States, employing 8,000–10,000 Mexicans, 4,000 Chinese, and 800 Japanese by 1930. After each harvest, the CRLC discharged tenants and day laborers and burned their makeshift huts to prevent squatting.
Around 1900, early irrigation efforts transformed the dry, sandy Imperial Valley into a garden of abundance for specialty crops. Shortly afterward, cotton, a labor-intensive crop requiring a large labor force, was introduced to Imperial County. In this photograph from the early 1900s, cotton bales are stacked next to a railroad track at a typical cotton gin in the Imperial-Mexicali Valley.

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THE 1930 STRIKE

Repatriation in the Imperial Valley began with a violent pea strike in January 1930. The brutal crackdown that crushed the walkout resulted in the valley's first large-scale voluntary repatriation movement. The union's defeat set in motion a chain of events that culminated in the redirection of circular migration to repatriation in the Mexicali Valley. In the midst of the strike, A. Mejia, the union president, sent telegrams to Mexico's president and agricultural department requesting aid to repatriate thousands of Mexicans. When the union announced that the Mexican government had granted Mejia's request, an overflow crowd in Brawley's union hall spilled into the street, cheering wildly. Mejia declared: "We believe that colonization on a Mexican agricultural project will be better than 30 to 35 cents an hour in Imperial valley." He then closed the hall to all meetings except those dealing with repatriation.26

Within three months, Brawley's union militants had organized the Vanguardia de Colonización Proletaria (Vanguard of Proletariat Colonization). The campesinos were ambitious. The group's representative told a leading Mexico City newspaper that he was in the nation's capital to convince government officials to support the Vanguardia's plan to relocate millions of ethnic Mexicans from the United States to a gigantic colonization enterprise in Mexico. He claimed that the group had 40,000 Mexican and Mexican American members and $40,000 in the bank and that they anticipated raising $12-15 million within five months to enact the plan.27

The existence of this strategy and others like it suggests the enthusiasm with which ethnic Mexicans in the United States viewed repatriation, though it is doubtful that the Mexican government provided land for the Imperial Valley.
Upon purchasing land in northern Baja California in the early 1900s, the Los Angeles-based Colorado River Land Company (CRLC) began to construct an irrigation system, creating a highly productive agricultural empire in the Mexicali Valley. This newly dug main canal (note the absence of weeds on the banks) snaked through the fertile desert to irrigate the CRLC’s vast landholdings.

Sherman Library

repatriates at this time. In 1934, a Brawley mutualista report documented local labor conditions, revealing that campesinos there had organized “a mass repatriation” that “was only partially accomplished. Similar groups with identical ideas were formed practically all over the State of California, particularly in Southern California.” The popularity of repatriation schemes showed “how hopeless the Mexican situation was” in America.28

Imperial Valley campesinos were in a tenuous position because farmer-worker relations there were as contentious as in the Mexicali Valley, where governors set minimum wages and arbitrated labor disputes, usually favoring employers. Yet workers in Mexicali could appeal directly to the territorial governor and to the executive branch in Mexico City for redress. Although unions were plentiful and workers frequently went on strike, once a governor made a labor-related decision, it was final. If workers did not return to work, Mexicali troops scattered picketers and arrested the leaders. Hard-core labor activists were occasionally dispatched to prison.

Executive labor decisions minimized massive walkouts, but Mexico’s political structure also gave unions bargaining power by instructing workers to strike in order to force the governor to raise wages. Power to set wages put governors
in the tenuous position of balancing the needs of business and labor, which often resulted in workers’ dissatisfaction. Workers responded to unfavorable decisions by petitioning the president to replace the governor. Though the territorial government in the Mexicali Valley differed distinctly from the Imperial Valley’s political structure, pro-landowner bias often was similar. Harsh conditions in the Mexicali Valley thus factored into migrants’ decisions of whether to leave the Imperial Valley, strike, or voluntarily repatriate to Mexico.

Migrants were caught in a borderland’s vice. In the Imperial Valley they faced declining wages and a repressive police state; in the Mexicali Valley they encountered unsympathetic governors, a scarcity of available land, and a lack of jobs due to the Depression’s devastation of the cotton industry. Within months of the 1930 strike, Mexican officials expressed alarm over the explosion of expatriates deported and forcibly repatriated from the United States. The Mexican government sent Secretary of Communications and Public Works General Juan Andreu Almazán to investigate conditions on Mexico’s northwestern borderlands. Almazán’s report to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio strongly recommended immediately purchasing “at any cost” the CRLC’s fiefdom and resettling there industrious but unemployed Mexican nationals living in the United States. The nationalistic report criticized Asians and recommended their deportation. Almazán also urged colonization of the region to increase Colorado River water use as a strategy to strengthen Mexico’s negotiating position in allocating the river before Boulder (later Hoover) Dam became operational. Two months later, Ortiz Rubio directed the agricultural ministry to cancel or revise the CRLC’s land concession. In the meantime, the government reduced customs duties for items that the repatriates brought with them into Mexico. Additionally, Mexicali officials began deporting Chinese and Japanese to free up tenant and farm jobs.

THE PUBLIC CHARGE, SELF-HELP, AND STRIKES

In the United States, Mexican emigrants, many of whom were undocumented aliens, feared poverty and long-term unemployment because of the increased risk of deportation. According to the immigration code’s “likely to be a public charge” provision, they could be deported or forced to repatriate for vagrancy, inability to pay medical bills, or application for public assistance. To minimize violations of the public charge provision, Mexico instructed its consuls in the United States to organize mutualistas to provide charity to the sick, unemployed, and destitute.

In 1925, when U.S. officials refused public assistance to Mexican nationals, the Mexican consul created local chapters of the mutualista la Cruz Azul Mexicana in several Imperial Valley towns. The consul instructed the charity’s officers in Brawley to inform the local judge that Mexicans would no longer burden him with pleas for public assistance. In Calexico, where Mexicans comprised 60 percent of the community’s 6,500 residents, a mutualista operated several clinics and maintained half a dozen beds reserved for ethnic Mexicans in the hospital. Despite these self-help efforts, whites continued to stereotype Mexicans as addicted to public aid. Countering this perception, the state labor statistician told farmers that contrary to popular opinion, “It is not his nature that makes the Mexican take charity, but the fact that he is underpaid. He has little share in the wealth which he helps create.” Campesinos’ ability to engage in circular migration and avoid transgressing the public charge...
Beginning in the early twentieth century, Mexican communities created mutualistas—cultural, political, service, and social organizations that included the families of workers. For Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans living in poverty conditions in the Imperial Valley, such institutions provided significant economic support. This structure, which housed the Centro Mutualista de Zaragoza in Tijuana, Baja California, is similar to the mutualistas found on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

San Diego History Center

provision diminished during the Great Depression. Nationally, the U.S. Border Patrol aggressively deported legal and illegal Mexicans who applied for public assistance or who could not pay their medical bills. In various states, relief workers pressured ethnic Mexicans who received public assistance to repatriate. Towns in the Imperial Valley set up privately funded programs to feed and clothe residents, but migrants did not receive aid. By the summer of 1933, the sheer number of aid cases overwhelmed private relief, compelling state and federal welfare agencies to provide food and clothing to the needy, including noncitizens, even during strikes. Around the country, the introduction of New Deal welfare programs shifted funding sources and decision-making from locals to outsiders with different criteria for giving or denying aid. This played a significant role in ending large-scale Mexican repatriation across the United States.

In the Imperial Valley, the introduction of federal aid provoked controversy. Early in 1934, for example, farmers were furious when striking pea pickers received relief. Local officials seized control of the relief decisions and ensured that welfare policy would be predicated on the needs of agribusiness. By the beginning of the cantaloupe harvest later that summer, 9,895 persons received public assistance. Although Mexicans made up only one-third of the county’s population, they accounted for more than 57 percent of those receiving aid. Welfare provided an incentive for migrants to stay in the area, but it served the needs of Imperial Valley farmers as well. By allowing campesinos to get relief between har-
vests, growers maintained an overabundance of labor that drove wages down.³⁹

Momentous events in the latter half of the year convinced migrants to avoid the Imperial Valley, voluntarily repatriate to the Mexicali Valley, and demand land from the Mexican government. Privation, failed strikes, deportations, and forced repatriation in California combined to radicalize many campesinos in the Imperial-Mexicali Valley. The introduction of socialist and communist organizers on both sides of the international line fueled transborder radicalism and exploded in massive strikes on both sides of the border.

The Imperial Valley cantaloupe strike of 1934 has been well documented. Crushing it required a combination of unprecedented violence and the strike-breaking activities of the Mexican consul Joaquín Terrazas, who siphoned workers away from the campesino union and into a pro-farmer union under his control.⁴⁰ Local welfare officials soon entered the fray. In the midst of the labor walkout, they moved to intimidate campesinos by announcing the forced repatriation of 1,200 aliens on relief. The timing of this threat, and the fact that there was no follow up to it, suggests it was a warning to workers to get back to work.⁴¹ After the strike, the relief office transitioned into a farm employment agency. Relief recipients were stricken from the relief rolls if they did not take low-paying field jobs. Agribusiness functionaries also used public assistance as a weapon against strikers.⁴² Migrant disempowerment continued the next year when Consul Terrazas was transferred to another post. Without him, the field union evaporated, leaving campesinos without union representation.⁴³

LAND EXPROPRIATION

Immediately following the strike, agraristas (agrarian militants) in the Mexicali Valley began organizing and petitioning the government for ejidos (communal farms). Unlike the small, privately owned farm cooperatives and the territorial cooperatives already in existence, the ejidos were federal projects. Petitioners for ejidos were emboldened by the government’s increasingly nationalistic stance toward the CRLC. In the midst of the 1934 presidential election, Mexican officials forced an American to sell his 18,000-acre ranch to the government, which then distributed parcels to Mexican yeoman farmers supported by long-term government loans. While campaigning in September of that year, candidate General Lázaro Cárdenas, who supported redistributing foreign-owned land, visited Mexicali to inspect the agricultural colonies.⁴⁴ Upon his election in November, Mexicans on both sides of the Baja California borderland sent him numerous telegrams expressing their hardships and asking for help. Cárdenas responded by dispatching federal officials to investigate conditions and resolve disputes.⁴⁵ In time, the return of thousands of expatriates pressured Mexican officials to negotiate land sales from the CRLC and to develop the region for Mexican farmers.

When the aforementioned repatriation convoy crossed into Mexicali, the December 15 issue of the Calexico Chronicle described their entrance with “chickens, goats, ducks, geese, farm implements, household goods and innumerable

Momentous events in the latter half of the year [1934] convinced migrants to avoid the Imperial Valley, voluntarily repatriate to the Mexicali Valley, and demand land from the Mexican government.
The December 1934 caravan of Mexican nationals who voluntarily repatriated to Mexico settled on Colonia Mexico Libre, a 2,800-acre communal farm expropriated from foreign landowners as part of Mexico's agrarian reform movement. Departing Calexico, the 152 colonists crossed the border at Mexicali, Baja California, stopping at the checkpoint of the international boundary (foreground).

Courtesy, Pomona Public Library, Pomona, CA

children" in twenty-eight cars and trailers. They had been planning the move for eight months. Several months prior, they had sent a delegation to select their land and to confer with Mexican authorities who had negotiated the deal. U.S. and Mexican customs and immigration officials cooperated to speed the group across the border, but the repatriates waved away all offers of U.S. assistance, explaining that they had squirreled away the necessary funds during their years of planning.46

Two days later, the Calexico Chronicle shed additional light on the colonization of the Mexicali Valley, reporting on a discussion about the repatriation convoy between California governor Frank Merriam and General Agustín Olachea, the governor of the northern territory of Baja California. Olachea indicated that he was pleased the migrants were returning home. He asserted that Mexico stood to gain from the scientific knowledge the campesinos had acquired while working on commercial farms in the United States. Merriam emphasized that the migrants had done nothing to cause California authorities to request their removal.47

The exchange between the two executives underscores the different meanings each attached to repatriation. Whereas Olachea expressed smug satisfaction that the migrants' return would benefit Mexico, Merriam inferred that the campesinos were welcome to labor in California as long as they did not request relief. Indeed, the
decision of thousands of migrants to abandon their circular migration patterns to settle in the Mexicali Valley boded ill for California farmers in general and in particular for growers in the Imperial Valley who had become dependent on mobile campesinos.

As the Great Depression and strikes crippled agricultural production in the Imperial Valley, in 1935 the Mexicali Valley’s farm economy broke out of its economic slump. Farmers planted 100,000 acres in cotton, 35,000 acres in wheat, and various other crops. Local leaders expressed optimism for solid profits and plentiful jobs. The giddy head of the Mexicali Chamber of Commerce bragged that every available acre had been planted and that farmers had even plowed “virgin” ground. The sheer size of the cotton acreage required another 1,000 pickers recruited from Mexico’s interior and other parts of Baja California. When cotton prices rose suddenly in December 1935, Mexicali farmers sent urgent notices for harvesters. For the first time since the depression began, field hands were making good money. Bountiful cotton profits convinced farmers to plant an additional 15,000 acres in 1936.48

Functionaries of the Mexican government continued to express grave concerns about the hardship and abuses endured by its emigrants across the border. High-level officials frequently visited southern California to explore the feasibility of settling repatriates onto ejidos in the Mexicali Valley. The Cárdenas administration forced the CRLC to sell portions its holdings to repatriates on long-term mortgages backed by the nation’s farm bank. In March 1935, for example, government officials finalized the sale of a 2,800-acre ranch, renamed Colonia México Libre, home of the repatriation convoy that had arrived the previous December. The bank furnished loans to purchase equipment for the farmers’ communal use and seed to grow animal feed crops and cotton. Deeds to their private holdings were for 40 acres. Colonia México Libre symbolized both the hope of the new property owners and the act of throwing off the yoke of foreign landowners. In line with the government’s push to educate the masses, officials pledged to erect a school.49

The Mexican government had published its intention to colonize Baja California in early 1935. The high priority given to populating Mexicali was reflected in the government’s actions to make the region attractive. Responding to frequent requests, in mid-1935 farm implements were added to the list of products allowed to pass duty free through the Mexicali port of entry. Although the duty had been small, the decree was another measure that helped to pull expatriates back to Mexico. A year later, officials purchased material to build six modern rural schools.50

President Cárdenas sent scores of bureaucrats to prepare for land redistribution. In April 1935,
Migrant families in the Imperial Valley often lived year round in ramshackle homes made of discarded lumber, tarps, burlap, and cardboard. Nearby ditches provided water for cooking, bathing, and drinking. There were no latrines. The most important items for mobile workers were the stove (see pipe protruding from the roof) and the automobile. In this photograph, a young girl peeks out the door of her makeshift dwelling against the backdrop of a harvested field.

Library of Congress, photograph by Dorothea Lange

Secretary of Agriculture Tomás Garrido Canabal toured Mexicali to inspect the conditions among the repatriates and to plan for further colonization. His entourage included twelve commissioners and subcommissioners, experts in irrigation, agriculture, land development, and engineering.

At a gigantic open-air gathering in Mexicali, and later in Los Angeles, Canabal promoted the government’s ambitious plans to encourage one million Mexicans living in the American Southwest to settle in the Mexicali Valley as self-supporting yeoman farmers. The impetus for the plan, he explained, was the severe disappointment expressed by migrants who had left their native land with high expectations of work in the United States but instead had found unemployment and hardship. Returning penniless, they became a burden upon Mexican society. The Cárdenas administration’s plans for interior colonization would diminish the individual and collective effects of the campesinos’ disappointments.51

Later that fall, Baja California governor General Gildardo Magaña conferred with business and government leaders in Mexico City on how to develop the Mexicali Valley. Afterward, a federal commission arrived in the valley to explore all aspects of settling the region. On November 23, Secretary of the Interior Silvano Barba González announced a forthcoming visit to Mexicali to inspect the border immigration stations and investigate the feasibility of establishing farming cooperatives. Within days, General Saturnino Cedillo, the new secretary of agriculture, arrived with a contingent of army officers to tour the territory. He then traveled to Los Angeles to exhort Mexicans to move to Mexicali. Magaña and other government officials also visited Los Angeles to encourage repatriation. After attending a picnic in his honor, the governor flew to Mexico City to finalize colonization plans. Between 300 and 400 people a month moved to the Mexicali Valley, based on the number of border-pass applications to shop in Calexico.52
Despite the intense government activity in settling the Mexicali Valley, the CRLC sold few individual plots. A combination of inertia and a lack of settlers with sufficient capital resulted in slow land sales. In April 1936, the CRLC finally inked a contract with the Mexican government to sell 165,000 acres of its developed land to Mexican farmers in parcels ranging from 40 to 375 acres. Although the agreement provided for twenty-year financing, it effectively locked out the vast majority of campesinos, most of whom did not have the funds or access to credit to purchase property, equipment, and other necessities.53

These events marked the end of an era of Mexican circular migration on the California-Baja California borderland. Following the 1934 cantaloupe strike, the domination of campesino labor in the Imperial Valley began to shift with the arrival of thousands of destitute workers in 1935. A deluge of white and black domestic migrants from the South and the Southwest fleeing economic dislocation arrived in the Imperial Valley, along with 6,000 male Filipino workers, some from as far away as Alaska. The newcomers saturated the labor market, took jobs from ethnic Mexicans, and lowered wages for all. In 1936, with the arrival in California of almost 85,000 Dust Bowl refugees, white transients began replacing Mexicans as California’s dominant farm labor force. By mid-1937, they comprised half of the valley’s field workers. According to the periodical Country Gentlemen, farmers claimed whites were “better workers, less transient but more labor conscious,” making “agricultural unions more potent.” Agribusiness responded to numerous resulting strikes by creating the Associated Farmers, a militant organization whose “special deputies” broke up picketing and smashed unions.54

A perfect storm now brewed along the Baja California borderlands. A superabundance of workers and low wages in the Imperial Valley combined with opportunities to acquire land in the Mexicali Valley made repatriation to the Mexicali Valley even more attractive to campesinos. To free up jobs, Mexican repatriates and unions in Baja California petitioned government officials to expel Asian laborers and tenants. Xenophobic screeds prompted the Chinese consul in Mexicali to send the Chinese home.55 The Mexicali Valley’s Japanese colony departed as well.56

Salvador España, a young engineer, was an influential local advocate for ejidos in the mid-1920s. A decade later, he launched a transnational movement on the Baja California borderlands to encourage the landless to petition for the federal government’s expropriation and redistribution of the CRLC estate. Although deathly ill and bedridden, España worked tirelessly to see his life’s work come to fruition.57 In June 1936, ejido activists brought together 3,000 campesinos in Mexicali to demand land.58 Baja California residents also requested government favors and subsidies. In July 1936, for example, the new territorial
governor, General Gabriel Gavira, met with President Cárdenas to discuss speeding up land sales and building a railroad line to the adjoining state of Sonora. To placate frustrated residents, the government purchased construction material and announced plans to start laying tracks, putting 700–800 men to work.

After a year of investigations and reports on colonizing the Mexicali Valley, President Cárdenas urged citizens in a national radio address in September 1936 to support his vision of building up the southern territory of Quintana Roo and the northern territory of Baja California. He estimated a cost of eight million pesos to build schools, rail lines, irrigation projects, and eliminate import duties. He referred to negotiations with the United States to allow a satisfactory portion of the Colorado River to irrigate Mexicali and invited expatriates to return to Mexico. A week later, the Mexican Senate affirmed Cárdenas’s territorial development plan.

Over a period of nine months following its April 1936 contract with the Mexican government, the CRLC had settled only a few hundred colonists. Disaffected ejidatarios (supporters of communal farms) responded to the slow pace with violence. Agraristas seized farms and compelled the government to legitimize their actions. Their defiance is celebrated today in the Mexicali Valley as “El Asalto a las Tierras” (The Assault on the Lands). At a rowdy meeting with the governor on January 26, 1937, a leader exclaimed: “Look Mr. Governor, Article 27 of the Constitution says that the lands are the property of the nation; that is why we request them. If you are going to deny us our constitutional rights as Mexicans, we will use force to take the lands, and if you do not give us water, we will break the floodgates.”

The next morning, some 400 agraristas seized CRLC ranches and chased off the Asian and Mexican tenants. Troops hauled the leaders to the stockade, but President Cárdenas immediately released them. Taken aback by the brazen land grab, Cárdenas requested the agraristas send a delegation to Mexico City to meet with him.

In the interim, militants took over farms and told small landowners, tenants, and even long-time farmers living on the territorial communes to leave. When reports of these abuses reached Cárdenas, he ordered the territorial governor to send soldiers to quell the disorder. In a stern message, the governor released a statement from the president that called illegal land seizure treason. Over the next few days, troops arrested some eighty squatters. But agraristas ignored the soldiers, leaving tenants and Mexican farmers wondering whether to proceed with planting or wait until the government resolved the crisis.

Although a new governor, Colonel Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada, assured the public that unrest and squatting would not be tolerated, the Cárdenas administration gave no assurances to the small landowners who had signed long-term mortgages with the CRLC or to the residents of the territorial cooperatives that their property would be protected beyond the current year.

News of the agraristas’ land seizure galvanized the country’s major labor organizations to send messages to President Cárdenas urging him not to use the military against the militants. In Mexico City, the meeting between the delegation of agraristas and Cárdenas had the desired effect. No longer willing to tolerate the suffering of the peasantry, the president jettisoned the colonization plan for self-supporting farmers and decided instead to expropriate the CRLC’s estate in March 1937. The stunning announcement came from the chief of the agrarian department, who would remain in Mexicali until the transfer of CRLC property to ejidos was complete. The government opened a land bank and an agrarian agency with an engineer to oversee the technical aspects of the operation. The National Bank of Communal Farm Credit in Mexico City pledged a million pesos in farm financing to 2,500 ejidatarios.
Bolstered by the expropriation announcement, agraristas issued menacing threats to the small landowning farmers, cooperative farmers, and tenants. Spurred by rumors of impending violence and land seizure, the governor reiterated that current contracts and tenant agreements would be enforced. Terrorized by militants, farmers and tenants sent telegrams to President Cárdenas begging for assurance their property rights were secure. Receiving no reply, a delegation of yeoman farmers traveled to Mexico City to personally state their case. A few days later, a thousand small farmers and tenants staged a U.S.-style sit-down strike in the territorial palace demanding protection and exemption from the ejido plan. When union members sympathetic to the small farmers met in Mexicali, several hundred agraristas assaulted them. In the countryside, armed militants told farmers to leave.66

With the government unwilling to enforce martial law in the rural areas, farm families converged in the territorial palace’s park. For twenty days, 10,000 protesters held a sit-down strike, refusing to leave until they met with the president. When Cárdenas rejected their demands, they sent a scathing letter accusing officials of misleading him. Cárdenas assigned a presidential commission to resolve the dispute. But the “striking farmers” had allies among the commercial sectors of Mexicali and with trade unions, and expressions of support poured in from around the nation. As tense negotiations dragged on, the determined farmers and their allies threatened a general shutdown of Baja California. Local and national support for the strikers convinced Cárdenas to modify his communal plan. He exempted the territorial cooperatives, eleven newly created federal colonies, four privately owned colonies, nine colonies created by the CRLC under the original colonization contract, and Colonia México Libre, established for the December 1934 repatriation caravan. Government officials also pledged compensation to farmers for losses caused by the agraristas.67

The Mexican government swiftly prepared ejidos for landless residents and repatriates. Shipments of farm machinery arrived, surveyors marked boundaries, and tenants were given final dates to harvest crops and vacate ranches. In a surprising announcement, after years of lobbying by Mexicali merchants and businesses, Cárdenas decreed a (mostly) duty-free zone along the Baja California borderlands in June—another example of the president’s determination to populate and spur economic growth on the borderlands. By July, the Agrarian Commission had created over forty ejidos with almost 5,000 settlers. When Cárdenas left office three years later, the government had taken over 422,000 acres dedicated to more than fifty communal farm settlements. Between 1915 and 1946, a total of sixty-four ejidos and thirty-six colonies were carved out of the CRLC’s fiefdom.68

DIVERGENT ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

The astounding developments in the Mexicali Valley had an immediate impact on the Imperial Valley labor force. The overabundance of labor that had pleased Imperial Valley farmers ended at the same time as the expropriation of the CRLC estate. In March 1937, ten days after the CRLC seizure, a roundtable discussion among prominent state and local officials and agribusiness leaders had conferred to address unemployment, welfare, and seasonal labor for the upcoming harvests. Traditionally in June, when the cantaloupe season reached its zenith, plenty of workers vied for jobs. But migratory campesinos were not arriving as before and employers complained of a severe shortage of “experienced” (the code word for Mexicans, in agricultural parlance) melon pickers to harvest the highly perishable crop. Although white men were begging for jobs, the employment director affirmed, “Let it be understood that I want and will accept only thoroughly experienced men.” Despite his request of 150 pickers from other county employment agencies,
A Mexican migrant worker thins and weeds cantaloupe plants in the Imperial Valley in March 1937. Illustrative of back-breaking industrial agriculture, each cantaloupe in this field had a waxed paper "cap" placed on it by hand and spread over a wire wicket to protect against cold and to accelerate growth. By June, campesinos had found better working and living conditions across the border, impacting the availability of Mexican laborers in the Imperial Valley.

Library of Congress, photograph by Dorothea Lange

150 Mexicans from other areas who were released from the welfare rolls spurned the Imperial Valley. Only twenty-six men showed up, with a few small groups trickling in later.

In October of that year, while officials in the Mexicali Valley were settling repatriates on ejidos across the border, the Imperial County employment officer who had played an instrumental role in forcing unemployed persons off the welfare rolls and into the fields could not explain why Mexicans had not arrived to pick cotton, despite the availability of 500 jobs. "Migrant farm laborers are not coming back to the valley this year as early as in past years," he remarked. Three weeks later, he was still hoping migrants would show up. In February 1938, some 2,000 white families from Texas and Arizona answered advertisements for American pea pickers. It appears that campesinos had rejected the Imperial Valley as a destination on the migration circuit. Lackluster crop prices in 1938 and 1939 further reduced migrant jobs. Thus, events on both sides of the invisible Imperial-Mexicali border drew repatriates to the Mexicali Valley.

In 1939, President Cárdenas embarked on a two-month, 6,000-mile farewell tour of Mexico's northern border. He inspected 400 communities, devoting nearly all his time on agrarian projects ushered in during his administration. Cárdenas spent five days in Mexicali, conferring day and night with peasants and small farmers. In a speech at an ejido, he exhorted the settlers to work hard, shun drinking, and rebuild the Mexican economy. In another speech, he urged Mexicans living in the United States to return home. Cárdenas deepened his commitment to develop the desert region by approving of a twelve-million-peso irrigation district on the former CRLC estate. In addition to pledging to finish the railroad to Sonora, he endorsed a two-million-peso bond to finance a 131-mile road to the port of San Felipe to develop fishing and tourism, as well as other business-friendly initiatives.

Underscoring the high government priority given to colonizing the Mexicali Valley, Cárdenas designated Ramón Beteta, Mexico's undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, with overseeing the repatriation of Mexican nationals living in California. Cárdenas set up the northern territorial colonization commission, headed by the territorial governor. As chief colonizing agent, the governor was given broad powers to speed up settlement. He was also instructed to recruit colonists from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Cárdenas's efforts to Mexicanize the northern portion of Baja California paid handsome dividends. The region's 1940 census (including Tijuana) revealed that 77,509 of the 78,907 residents were Mexicans.
In the Mexicali Valley, the population increased from 29,985 in 1930 to 44,399 a decade later.72

BRIDGING ERAS

The Great Depression ended a generation of Mexican family circular transnational and domestic migration. A repertoire of strategies including U.S. migration, mutualista self-help, strikes, and voluntary repatriation, which had given Imperial Valley campesinos the ability to improve their economic status, ended when wages declined, strikes failed, and jobs became scarce. National and international events overshadowed changing local conditions. The United State’s deportation and massive forced repatriation of Mexican nationals played into President Lázaro Cárdenas’s vision of colonizing Mexico’s northern borderlands with small farmers. In 1937, when Cárdenas expropriated the CRLC’s vast landholdings, Mexican repatriates embraced the opportunity to exchange a difficult itinerant lifestyle in America for the prospect of farming in the Mexicali Valley.

Although repatriation, land expropriation, and colonization took place across the U.S.-Mexico borderland, recent scholarship on Cárdenas’s repatriation efforts in the Mexican states adjoining Texas most closely resembles what transpired in the Imperial-Mexicali region, albeit with significant differences. More ethnic Mexicans lived in Texas than in any other U.S. state and most repatriates came from Texas, which had a reputation of being virulently anti-Mexican. Consequently, there were more repatriate colonies in the Mexican states south of Texas. One of the unique factors of colonization in the Mexicali Valley was Baja California’s vulnerability to U.S. annexation, which propelled Mexico to populate the region. Another difference between the Mexicali Valley and other parts of Mexico’s far north involved the race to build up water usage from the Colorado River before the completion of Boulder Dam.

Voluntary repatriation bridged two eras of Mexican mobility: family circular migration and the Bracero Program. The depopulation of ethnic Mexicans from the United States alarmed American employers during World War II. The loss of plentiful low-wage campesino migrants, however, presented an opportunity to create a new seasonal Mexican labor regime, but this time without families, theoretically avoiding the vexing issues of housing, schooling, and assimilating ethnic Mexicans. Building on the cooperation between the U.S. Border Patrol and Mexico’s Migration Service for voluntary repatriation, the two governments enacted the Bracero Program, a partnership creating a labor migration arrangement restricted to men.

The Bracero Program was initially appealing to Mexico because it now regulated migration, thereby maintaining a steady flow of remittances while providing a safety valve for excess unemployment. It also minimized the number of expatriates and eliminated the need to resettle thousands of Mexican nationals expelled from the United States during an economic downturn. U.S. employers strongly supported the Bracero Program because it gave them the ability to regulate seasonal labor needs. Braceros eventually replaced most American migrant farm workers in the American West and significantly reduced strikes, which served to maintain wages and working and living conditions satisfactory to U.S. employers.

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2 The Brawley News (hereafter cited as TBN), Dec. 14, 1934; for the figure of 152 repatriates, see the Calexico Chronicle (hereafter cited as CC), Dec. 17, 1934; for the origin of the families, see CC, Dec. 15, 1934.

3 TBN, Dec. 14, 1934.


11 See, for example, Repatriation of Mexican Nationals, file 55957/456, Department of Labor and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives, Washington, DC.


16 David Acosta Montoya, “*Precursores del agrarismo*” and “El Asalto a Las Tierras” en el Estado de Baja California (Mexicali, MX: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1985), 26–86.

17 TBN, June 12, 1920.


19 For the ban, see Duncan, “The Chinese,” 633; TBN, Nov. 7, 1925.

20 TBN, Sept. 12 and 15, 1924; Sánchez Ramírez, *Crónica agrícola, 72–82; Carrillo, Reconquista y colonización, 162–64; Ábel L. Rodríguez, *Memoria administrativa del gobierno del Distrito Norte de la Baja California, 1924–1927* (Mexicali, MX: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1925) [© 1928], chap. 4.

21 Statement of Harry Chandler, 72.


24 Statement of Harry Chandler, 62, 64.


26 TBN, Jan. 14, 1930.

27 Balderama and Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal,* 199–200.

28 "Report Rendered to the Honorable Federal Board of Investigation by the Comité Mexicano de Bienestar Social (Mexican Social Welfare Committee) of Brawley, California, February 1934," carton 14, folder 58, n.p., Inventory of the Paul S. Taylor Papers, MSS 84/18C, The Bancroft Library Archival Collections, University of California, Berkeley.

29 Spanish and English translation of an excerpt from "*Report Submitted by General Juan Andrew Almaza* [Ján, Secretary of Communications and Public Works, to the President of the Republic, with Reference to His Journey through the Northwestern Part of the Country, Mexico, July, 1930,]* 29–57, in the Spanish report, file Mexico, folder 1, Imperial Immigration District Archive, Imperial, CA.

30 TBN, Sept. 30 and Oct. 2, 1930.


33 TBN, Apr. 20, 1925.


35 TBN, Apr. 10, 1926.


38 TBN, May 2, 1934.


41 TBN, June 6, 1934.

42 Ibid., Nov. 15 and Dec. 27, 1934.

43 CC, Apr. 16 and 22, May 8, 1935.

44 Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute,* 46, 55; CC, Sept. 19, 1934: for the land sale, see CC, Sept. 21, 1934.


46 CC, Dec. 15, 1934.


48 Ibid., Mar. 4 and 27, July 23, Nov. 21, Dec. 6 and 17, 1935, and May 6, 1936.

49 CC, Mar. 6, 1935; for the CRLC’s perspective of land sales and expropriation, see Kerig, “Yankee Enclave,” 314–81.
from 1915 to 1945, see 102 (Table 8).

Agricultura y migración en el Valle de Mexicali: 937

69 CC, Mar. 23 and June 21 (quote) and 22, 1937.

"Yankee Enclave," 380; for the 1915-46 sta

May 14, 1936.

Ibid., Nov. 21, 1935, July 20 and Sept. 17, 1937.

Ibid., June 8 and Aug. 5, 1936.

Ibid., Sept. 30 and Oct. 8, 1936.

Ibid., Jan. 5, 1937.

Dwyer, The Agrarian Dispute, 61.

CC, July 15, 1936.

Ibid., April 2, 1936.

CC, Jan. 28, Feb. 2, and Mar. 4, 1937;

Sánchez Ramírez, Crónica agrícola, 104-6.

CC, Mar. 13 and 16, 1937; the Calexico Chronicle converted the peso amount to $277,500. Kerig, "Yankee Enclave," 358.

55 CC, Sept. 27, 1934; for sinophobia, see

55; Duncan, "The Chinese," 620.

IF WALLS COULD SPEAK: SAN DIEGO'S HISTORIC CASA DE BANDINI, BY VICTOR A. WALSH, PP 22–46

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1 A. P. Nasatir and Lionel U. Ridout, "Report to the Mayor and City Council and Historical Site Board on Historical Survey of Old Town Plaza" (typescript, 1967), 11.

2 They include Save Our Heritage Organization (San Diego), IS Architecture (La Jolla), Heritage Architecture and Planning (San Diego), and ASM Affiliates Inc. (Carlsbad). Soltek Pacific Construction (San Diego) was the general contractor. Funding was provided by the California Cultural and Historic Endowment, California State Parks, and previous concessionaire Delaware North Companies.

3 The French historian Pierre Nora has argued that memory is attached to places or "sites" that are concrete and physical—such as battlefields, cathedrals, buildings, or burial places that embody tangible notions of the past—as well as nonmaterial—such as spectacles, rituals, and public displays or commemorations that impart an aura of the past. He calls such places of collective significance "sites of memory." See Steven Hoeschler and Derek H. Alderman, "MemorY and Place: Geographies of a Critical Relationship," Social and Cultural Geography 5, no. 3 (Sept. 2004): 347-55; Greg Hise, "Sixty Stories in Search of a City," California History 85, no. 2 (2006): 8–26.


5 Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of California, vol. 2 (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Company, 1885), 708–9; Margaret Gaffey Kilroy, historical and biographical notes regarding Juan Bandini manuscript and typescript (1985), box 1, folder 7, Bandini Family Papers, MSS Coll. 101, Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as Bandini Family Papers); José Bandini, A Description of California in 1828, trans. Doris Marion Wright (Berkeley, CA: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1931), vi–vii; Arcadia Bandini Brennan, Arcadian Memories of California, 32 (typescript, 1952), box 1, folder 5, MSS C-D 5206, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. This source is also available at the San Diego History Center, San Diego. The Bancroft collection also contains photographs and additional folders on the family, including copies of the Bandini crest and shield. The crest, entitled Laus Dio Bandini, features two snakes coiled around a cross; the shield, entitled Bandini Gius- tini—Prince of Rome, the double-headed eagle.