Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists: Immigration Reform and the Deportation of Mexicans from South Texas in the 1920s

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Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/westhistquar.44.2.0167

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This article examines the significance of the large-scale deportation of Mexicans from South Texas beginning in 1928 and continuing into the early 1930s. Rather than a reaction to the outbreak of the Great Depression, this law enforcement campaign culminated years of debate between restrictionists, who sought to curtail immigration from Mexico, and anti-restrictionists, who demanded unhindered access to Mexican labor. The origin of these events lies more in repeated legislative failures by the nativists than in economic collapse.

Esperidión de León came to the United States from Mexico in 1916 and made his residence in the town of Mercedes in Hidalgo County, Texas. He married a Texas-born woman in 1927. By 1931 he and his wife had three children, all of whom were U.S. citizens. Although de León had worked for a local landowner for years and had never run afoul of the law, he became concerned once U.S. Immigration Service deportation drives began in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the late 1920s. The Immigration Act of 1924 granted immunity from prosecution or deportation to unauthorized migrants who had entered the United States before passage of the law and stayed there continuously, so de León obtained a notarized statement in August 1929 stating that he had been in the United States for twelve years without returning to Mexico, to protect him from the threat of expulsion. Despite this document, immigration agents seized him in March 1931 as he walked 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 him to state that he had entered the United States after 1925, in violation of the 1924 law. 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 for help.¹

Despite de León's precautions, he found himself caught up in the machinery of immigration control. His deportation was not, however, simply the result of a short-lived wave of nativist mania caused by the Great Depression. If that had been the case, why would he have obtained a notarized document to protect himself from Immigration Service deportation parties in August 1929, about two months before the stock market crash? He clearly reacted to a law enforcement campaign that began earlier. While short-term nativism created by the economic pressures of the Great Depression has long served as the simple explanation for why the United States deported thousands of Mexicans during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the case of Espiridión de León and other deportees from South Texas points toward something different. These deportations resulted from decades of nativist agitation and arguments over the proper place of Mexicans within the hierarchy of racial desirability that shaped immigration law in the United States.

De León came to South Texas at a time when hundreds of thousands of other emigrants left the disorder of the ongoing revolution in Mexico for the United States. These migrants entered the region at the same time that newcomer farm interests descended on the area from the Midwest and Southeast. These simultaneous population shifts allowed for the explosive growth of a region that was considered too dry and isolated for large-scale agriculture just a few years earlier. While the rest of the nation, and much of the rest of the world, suffered through a severe agricultural depression during the 1920s, South Texas rapidly became one of the most productive farming regions in the country. This success derived largely from growers' ability and willingness to exploit the large migrant population that flowed through the Texas-Mexico border region. Through the construction of overlapping systems of political, spatial, and economic domination, the Anglo elites of South Texas built a system that assured the persistence of a low-paid surplus labor force and a growing agricultural economy.

Agricultural interests dependent on these workers perceived a very real threat in efforts to limit immigration through the introduction of higher head taxes, literacy tests, and national-origins quotas. They watched as nativists successfully pushed the federal government to pass restrictionist legislation in the 1910s and 1920s that began to systematize and limit who could and should enter the United States.

¹ John Wilde to Miriam Ferguson, n.d.; notarized court document, 26 August 1929; and Espiridión de León to Ferguson, 2 March 1933, all file 301-495-23, Miriam Amanda Ferguson Gubernatorial Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin. I have not been able to determine what happened to de León or his family after the deportation. For more on the Immigration Act of 1924, see Mae M. Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton, NJ, 2004), 21–55 and Aristide R. Zolberg, A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 251–64.
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 an unrelenting battle to ensure that their conception of proper immigration controls would prevail. Nativists succeeded in passing a series of restrictive immigration laws, but immigrants from the Western Hemisphere remained outside of the restrictive quotas. As a result, the Southwest, which had been peripheral in the earlier formulations of restrictionist legislation, became the primary point of contention during these immigration debates. Nativists turned their attention to this hole in their regime of restriction in the years after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, focusing especially on the Texas-Mexico border region. This area had become a primary source of surplus labor for agricultural interests as far away as the Upper Midwest, so growers fought just as hard to maintain their access to Mexican workers. The focus of both restrictionists and anti-restrictionists on this region meant that the U.S.-Mexico border, and South Texas in particular, remained the geographic center of this debate into the 1930s.

Congressional nativists tried in both 1926 and 1928 to push through legislation that would have placed Mexico under the restrictive quotas but were unable to overcome the political clout of the anti-restrictionists. Rather than give up, nativists instead looked for a bureaucratic means to their goal. Beginning in 1928, they turned to large-scale deportations, which allowed them to simultaneously limit the number of Mexican citizens in the United States and claim that this law enforcement campaign proved the likelihood that Mexicans would commit crimes and therefore were not desirable immigrants. Their campaign swept across South Texas throughout 1928 and 1929. These deportations arose directly from the nativist desire to cut off immigration from Mexico. Thwarted in their attempts to have Mexico included in the quota laws, officials devised large-scale deportations in the Rio Grande Valley as an end-run around the repeated legislative failures of restrictionists in Congress. The Immigration Service saw the two strategies of restriction as complementary. Only after the economic collapse of 1929 did deportation efforts replace quota restrictions and spread to the rest of the country. By focusing almost entirely on deportations in California and the urban Upper Midwest, historians have neglected the earlier deportation drives in Texas. Since large-scale deportations did not start in California until 1930, a solitary focus there makes the deportation campaigns seem like a simple reaction to the Depression, ignoring the more complex reality. Rather than a departure from previous practice, then, the deportation drives represent a clear continuity of immigration restriction as it was practiced in the early decades of the twentieth century.2

2 For the classic study of Mexican repatriation and deportation during the Great Depression, though it deals almost entirely with Los Angeles, see Abraham Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929–1939 (Tucson, 1974). See also Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s (Albuquerque, 1995) and Camille Guérin-Gonzalez, Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900–1939 (New Brunswick, NJ,
The first step toward a systematic immigration code came with the Immigration Act of 1917. Previously, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Foran Act of 1885, and a series of additional laws in the early 1900s deemed unfit for entry Asians, foreign contract laborers, anarchists, prostitutes, the diseased, and anyone “likely to become a public charge.” The new 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. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, many applicants immediately withdrew their applications. Presumably, many simply entered as undocumented migrants across the largely unguarded southern border. Not surprisingly, the growers of South Texas, in the process of building their agricultural empires, angrily decried the legislation. Picking up the refrain that they had an inherent right to Mexican labor, the growers fretted that the immigration restrictions would ruin them. The U.S. Department of Labor, the Immigration Service, congressmen, and senators received an almost endless stream of letters and telegrams from farmers and other Texans who demanded an end to immigration restrictions. A mine manager in Central Texas, for instance, wrote to Senator Charles A. Culberson 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.” Similar urgent pleas for help came from all over the state, as chambers of commerce, often rechristened as “councils of defense” during World War I, begged for more labor from Mexico.

This pressure quickly had its intended result. Eighteen days after the immigration act went into effect on 5 May, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson bowed to these insistent calls for increased immigration. Wilson issued a departmental order that suspended the literacy test, head tax, and contract labor exclusion for Mexican agricultural labor.

1994). These studies, however, ignore Texas and fail to connect the deportations with the nativist agitation of the 1920s. Too many other studies to list have accepted the traditional narrative of deportations following the economic collapse, including two recent books that deal specifically with the history of U.S. deportation policy: Daniel Kanstroom, Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History (Cambridge, MA, 2007) and Deirdre M. Moloney, National Insecurities: Immigrants and U.S. Deportation Policy since 1882 (Chapel Hill, 2012).


Mark Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900–1940 (Westport, CT, 1976), 24.

E. S. Orgain to Charles A. Culberson, n.d., file 54261/202, box 271, Subject and Policy Files, 1893–1957, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787–2004, Record Group 85, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (hereafter Policy Files). This file contains many similar letters. The vast majority of these entreaties to the federal government came from Texas. Complaints came from other states as well but not on the same scale.
workers due to “an emergent condition, caused by the war.”6 By July 1918, these exemptions also covered workers leaving Mexico for work on the railroads, in any mining enterprise, or in construction work in any of the four border states, despite the concerns of the commissioner 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 . . . is quite likely so to deplete the supply available to the agricultural interests as to interfere materially in the direct production of the foodstuffs.”7

A few months later, Wilson gave further reason for these exemptions in a letter to Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor. 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 [sic]), has been to a large extent the means of relieving the pressure mentioned.8

In other words, Wilson justified his decision to the ardently restrictionist Gompers as the lesser evil that would placate the agriculturalists without allowing the reintroduction of Chinese immigration, the old bogeyman of craft unionists. Mexicans, in other words, would not remain in the United States as long as the hated Chinese.

Employers hoping to take advantage of these exceptions filed an application with either the Immigration Service or the U.S. Employment Service (USES) stating the number of workers needed, the “class of work,” the wages offered, and the place of employment. Upon acceptance of the application, the USES admitted the Mexican laborers, 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 States 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


7 Anthony J. Caminetti to Wilson, 11 June 1918 and departmental order by Wilson, 10 July 1918, both in file 54261/202, box 271, Policy Files. Smaller numbers of workers also came from the Bahamas and Jamaica under these same exemptions.

8 Wilson to Samuel Gompers, 20 December 1918, file 54261/202E, box 273, Policy Files.
time in the United States. Employers then sent this money via postal money order to
the inspector in charge at the worker'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 he or she left the country. Any worker who did not
return to Mexico at the end of this employment forfeited these 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.⁹

During the first year of this program, 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, protesting that the tempo-
rary admission system established by the Department of Labor was too time consuming
and bureaucratic. Herbert Hoover, then head of the U.S. Food Administration, waged
a persistent campaign to convince Secretary Wilson and the Department of Labor to
ignore the Immigration Act of 1917 when it came to the entry of Mexicans. In June 1918,
Hoover complained to Felix Frankfurter, 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, he 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 on his stay in the states.” Finally, he called for an end
to the requirement that “farmers must meet and contract with the laborer at the bor-
der. We hope to overcome this by having special representatives make these contacts
at Brownsville, Eagle Pass, Laredo, and El Paso.” 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.”¹⁰

One week later, Wilson replied to Hoover’s entreaty, reminding him that “this
Department is confronted with provisions of law which absolutely exclude from per-
manent entry to the United States a vast majority of the ordinary laborers that live
in the Republic of Mexico.” Wilson 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.” He 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 carry-
ing and securing of military information, and similar patterns are concerned.” In other

⁹ Departmental order by Wilson, 12 June 1918 and Caminetti to Wilson, 11 June 1918, both
in Policy Files.

¹⁰ Herbert Hoover to Felix Frankfurter, 4 June 1918, file 54261/202, box 271, Policy Files;
“Mexican Laborers Admitted under Order of Secretary of Labor, June 1, 1917 to March 1, 1918,”
n.d.; E. P. Reynolds to supervising inspector at El Paso, 26 February 1918; inspector in charge at
Hidalgo to supervising inspector at El Paso, n.d., all file 54261/202A, box 273, Policy Files; and
Reisler, Sweat of Their Brow, 30.
words, even though he declared exemptions to the Immigration Act of 1917 within a few days of its enactment as a wartime emergency measure, Wilson clearly agreed with the nativist contention that the government needed to impede permanent migration to the United States.\footnote{Wilson to Hoover, 11 June 1918, file 54261/202, box 271, Policy Files.}

A chorus of other voices joined Hoover’s, however, and increased the pressure on the Department of Labor and the Immigration Service to completely ignore the 1917 act. 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.”\footnote{L. B. Leighton to William Hollis, 10 July 1918, file 54261/202, box 271, Policy Files.} Telegrams from across Texas poured in, pleading “as a ‘win the war’ measure that all restrictions against Mexican labor be lifted except health regulations.”\footnote{Each chamber of commerce across Texas clearly had a form telegram they sent with a few variations according to the interests of the locality. Corsicana Chamber of Commerce to Caminetti, 25 July 1918, file 54261/202, box 271, Policy Files.}

But when World War I ended in November 1918, the reason for the Mexican exemptions disappeared. The next month, on 15 December, Wilson ended the exemptions. Importations continued for another month while all agricultural workers already in the United States were permitted to stay until the end of the next growing season.\footnote{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,” 13 January 1919 and “Mexican Laborers Imported Departmental Exceptions through the Port of Hidalgo,” 13 January 1919, both in file 54261/202, box 272, Policy Files; Reisler, \textit{Sweat of Their Brow}, 33; Caminetti to all commissioners and inspectors of Bureau of Immigration, 17 December 1918, file 54261/202, box 272; and departmental memo, Information and Education Service of the Department of Labor, 26 December 1918, file 54261/202E, box 273, both in Policy Files.} Not surprisingly, the looming reinstatement of the head tax and the 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 what Carey McWilliams termed “profit-patriotism.”\footnote{Reisler, \textit{Sweat of Their Brow}, 33 and Carey McWilliams, \textit{Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California} (Berkeley, 1939), 169.} Texas growers, such as Fred Roberts, president of the South Texas Cotton Growers’ Association, echoed the same sentiments: “We are short of labor. The real fact is we have not any labor. . . . We have always had free access to the Mexicans on the other side of the border, and we have always been going there for our labor.” Roberts estimated that 250,000 Mexican workers would be necessary to gather the coming cotton crop, which could only be secured if he ignored the immigration law. Cotton grower Roy Miller even argued that farm interests sought the resumption of unrestricted immigration of workers from Mexico for humanitarian reasons: “I think one of the greatest services the people of this country...
could render the people of Mexico today would be some arrangement whereby they could come across and help us and get paid for it. That would do more than anything else to tranquilize conditions on the border.” Despite these protests, however, the Department of Labor allowed the exemptions to lapse in early 1919. Thus, Mexicans and their prospective employers had to either abide by the letter of recent immigration law or ignore it and assume that enforcement would be lax.

The end of World War I led agriculturalists across the nation to plead for an end to the specific immigration regulations that they found inconvenient, but a dramatic increase in aggressive nativism culminated in far more restrictive legislation 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 grew as both political parties clamored to appease the interests of nativists. 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 and helped to cast movement across the southern border of the United States as the prototypical act of illegal migration.

The aftermath of the war created a worldwide trend toward exclusion that arose in reaction to the massive refugee populations created by the war’s devastation. As historian Mae M. Ngai argued, “the 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 claims of inherent rights became cemented more firmly and ineluctably to citizenship status granted by nation-states.

Stricter exclusionary immigration measures severely limited the rights that 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 legislation to bring these exclusionary ideals into reality, a deportation drive precipitated by the economic downturn of 1920–1921 sought to expel those immigrants who overstayed their exemptions along with any others deemed “a menace to the peace of the community.” Mexicans in places like Chicago and Detroit were especially vulnerable during a nationwide sweep of urban areas by the Immigration Service in 1921, which deported any Mexicans who could not prove permanent U.S. residency. This preview of the massive campaigns that began later in the decade also proved to some the substantive difference between immigration from Mexico versus other nations: it could be easily reversed and pushed

16 Admission of Mexican Agricultural Laborers: Hearing Before the Committee on Immigration . . . Pursuant to S. J. Res. 66, 66th Cong. 3, 4 (1920) (statement of Fred Roberts) and 11, 16 (statement of Roy Miller).

17 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 10; Saskia Sassen, Guests and Aliens (New York, 1999); and Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 19.
back south of the border. 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 later.

Individuals and groups who wanted Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere placed under quota restrictions often found themselves on the defensive against powerful agribusiness interests that vigorously lobbied to limit the severity of proposed legislation. Sugar beet corporations, southwestern growers, and others dependent on Mexican labor argued that quotas would decimate their workforce and were entirely unnecessary in the context of Mexican immigration. On many counts, the restrictionists and anti-restrictionists shared the same beliefs in Mexican racial degeneracy, but their conclusions as to its meaning differed. Anti-restrictionists continually argued that Mexicans possessed an innate homing instinct that impelled them to return to Mexico after time spent in the United States. According to this belief, Mexicans were little more than laboring tourists who would inevitably leave of their own accord. South Texas Congressman John Nance Garner, a primary spokesman for this viewpoint, constantly reiterated the homing pigeon analogy and pointed to the circular nature of the interstate migrant stream as an illustration.

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 U.S. society. By ridiculing restrictionist fears that Mexicans would degrade the nation’s racial stock, anti-restrictionists argued that they represented the only foreign labor force that did not constitute a social threat. George Clements of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, for instance, argued, “If we cannot get the Mexican to supply . . . casual labor, we have but one place to turn—the Porto Rican [sic] 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 [sic] sufficiently serious enough to have become a national question.” Finally, he asked rhetorically, “Is there any wonder we want to keep our Mexican labor?” According to Clements, Mexican immigration kept the Southwest from repeating the


racial problems of the Southeast by carefully seeking a workforce that supposedly left as suddenly as it appeared.\(^{20}\)

The anti-restrictionists sought a labor policy rather than an immigration policy in regard to Mexico. 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 that would remain eternally peripheral to the social and economic life of the United States. While the argument was far from over, for the time being, Mexicans remained exempt from quota restrictions. Their legal status became the “permanently marginal laborer” whose continued tolerance by Anglos in the United States required endless work without any efforts at social improvement. 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.\(^{21}\)

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 from 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 temporary exception of the Philippines, still a possession of the United States). The literacy test remained in place and the head tax and visa fee increased to eighteen dollars. 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 unauthorized immigration along the nation’s southern boundary introduced by the Immigration Act of 1917.

The 1924 law proved especially important in encouraging unauthorized entry, particularizing the “prototypical illegal alien” as Mexican and fashioning law enforcement’s reaction to these supposed threats to national sovereignty. Unlike earlier immigrants, new arrivals found it easier to avoid the obstacles to entry rather than overcome them. As demand for laborers in agriculture and industry grew in the 1920s, the number of illegal entries from Mexico increased apace.\(^{22}\)

Within these formulations of illegal entry, the newly formed U.S. Border Patrol emerged as the symbolic protectors of the nation from a lawless border region. It acted as both the 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 work or living conditions.\(^{23}\)

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The increase in deportations to Mexico during the 1920s created by these changing laws proved to many that Mexicans were the most flagrant and potentially dangerous violators of the law. The unintended consequences of the laws and their effects on population movements across the border shrouded the Mexican and Mexican American populations with the taint of illegality and illegitimacy. Thus, as 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.”

The Immigration Act of 1924 did not end the fight over quota restrictions, however. The same basic debates over the original quota laws continued during the second half of the decade. Restrictionists increased their attack on the racial suitability of Mexicans while anti-restrictionists pleaded economic necessity as they continued to argue that Mexicans possessed a 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 access to the labor source they deemed necessary for continued growth and low wages.

From his seat on the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, Representative John Box of Texas obsessively led the restrictionist forces in Congress during his twelve-year tenure, from 1919 to 1931. Box’s district was located in an old cotton-raising region in East Texas struggling to compete with growers in South Texas and their Mexican workforce, so restrictionist sentiment was more politically powerful in that region than elsewhere in the state. Box first submitted a bill to restrict immigration from the Western Hemisphere, especially from Mexico, shortly after the passage of the 1924 quota law. In 1926, at Box’s urging, the committee held hearings on the matter, and both sides of the debate arrived in Washington ready for battle.

Growers claimed 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. In the Los Angeles Times, Timothy Turner nicely summed up their claims when he wrote, “Mexican labor ebbs and flows over the border as it is needed here,” bringing with it a “minimum of social complexities.” The same logic emerged from other anti-restrictionists. Congressman Edward T. Taylor of Colorado proclaimed, “There is not a member of this committee, not even Brother Box himself, who is more of an immigration exclusionist than I am. I would like to put up the bars higher than they are and give the melting pot a chance to melt for a few years, and assimilate Americanism.” Still, he pleaded with his fellow congressmen to allow his state’s sugar beet interests to draw labor out of Mexico as an issue of short-term economic necessity, not “a matter of immigration at all.”

24 Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 89.
25 Higham, Strangers, 325.
26 Timothy Turner quoted in Sánchez, Becoming Mexican American, 83.
27 Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration
The anti-restrictionists also attempted to assuage some of their opponents’ fears by calling for the creation of a guest worker program that would only admit Mexican workers on a temporary basis. Although growers had complained incessantly throughout the World War I exemption program, they clearly feared that the growth in political nativism threatened immigration from Mexico. Arizona Congressman Carl Hayden, for instance, pointed to German guest worker programs that brought in farmworkers from Poland and Lithuania to fill labor shortages. “There is no country in the world which desires more to preserve the racial integrity of its people than Germany,” he argued. “The plan apparently worked well, and I do not see why the American Government, under similar circumstances, could not adopt the same idea for the benefit of our farmers” by exempting Mexican farmworkers from immigration restrictions.28

Box and the rest of the restrictionist forces, however, rejected both the usefulness and legality of such a program. In addition to the fact that Box did not think that these temporary migrations would be as benign as their supporters claimed, he believed that guest worker programs violated the spirit of free labor, creating a system no different from peonage. Thus, Box vehemently rejected the guest worker proposal. If the program operated as it should, it would have created a system that he deemed unconstitutional, and if temporary entry became permanent settlement, then all of the restrictionists’ efforts would have come to naught.29

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 Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, Princeton University economist Robert F. 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.” 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.” The core of Foerster’s contention 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. He complained that the 1924 immigration law gave preference “emphatically to immigration from the brown and black stocks.” He added, “If hereafter every immigrant from countries and islands lying to the south of the United States were to be replaced by an immigrant from approved parts of Europe, nothing but gain would result for the United States.” If, on the other hand, “Latin American stocks have a race value for our civilization substantially above what has been indicated in this report and that mixture of

28 Seasonal Agricultural Laborers, 191 (statement of Carl Hayden); Reisler, Sweat of Their Brow, 200–3; and Mapes, “Special Class of Labor,” 74–5.

29 Reisler, Sweat of Their Brow, 204.
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.\textsuperscript{30} 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.

Adding to the racial arguments, Box also tried to depict Mexicans as inherently criminal, which made them unfit for entry into the United States. During the testimony of South Texas grower S. Maston Nixon, Box interrupted to read off a list of narcotics, liquor, and smuggling indictments against Mexicans in Texas, claiming “[e]ighty percent of the names are those of Mexicans.” However, he had trouble reading the names, leading Nixon to reply derisively, “The Congressman cannot pronounce the Mexican names, yet he claims to be an authority on the Mexican. That sounds quite peculiar to a Texan.”\textsuperscript{31} While this effort by Box to cast Mexicans as dangerous criminals proved comically unsuccessful, it would remain one of the key aspects of restrictionist arguments.

While the restrictionists 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 he also thought that some sort of seasonal admissions system had to accompany any quota arrangement for the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{32} 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.

Over the next two years, mail flooded into Box’s office. Some writers opposed restriction efforts. The president of the Navasota Cooperage Company (in East Texas, north of Houston), wrote, “[Y]ou 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.”\textsuperscript{33}

The vast majority of letter writers supported Box’s efforts, though the reasons varied widely. Some echoed the arguments made by Samuel Gompers and the American

\textsuperscript{30} Robert F. Foerster, \textit{The Racial Problems Involved in Immigration from Latin America and the West Indies to the United States: A Report Submitted to the Secretary of Labor} (Washington, DC: GPO, 1925), 13, 14, 57, 60, 59.

\textsuperscript{31} Seasonal Agricultural Laborers, 46 (statement of S. Maston Nixon).

\textsuperscript{32} Reisler, \textit{Sweat of Their Brow}, 204.

\textsuperscript{33} J. H. Powell to John Box, 29 January 1926, folder 3, box 2, Oliver Douglas Weeks Papers, League of United Latin American Citizens Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas–Austin (hereafter Weeks Papers). Weeks transcribed all of the letters in the collection.
Federation of Labor. W. F. Cottingham, business manager of the Kleberg and Nueces County District 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, not agriculturalists, were the real culprits because they sought more Mexican immigrants as a way to rid themselves of unions and “maintain themselves as overlords of this vast domain.”

Many more supported the bill for racial reasons. Morrison Swift, radical-turned-eugenicist, enthusiastically wrote, “If every alien were shut out the American population would naturally increase to supply the labor demand. 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 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.”

As pressure continued to build, a similar avalanche of letters arrived at the offices of other committee members. As a result, in 1928 the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and the Senate Immigration Committee held a new series of hearings on the Box bill and its Senate counterpart, introduced by William J. 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 2 percent of the foreign-born population in the United States in 1890, Mexico would have received 1,500 quota slots. As in 1926, both sides came to Washington ready for a fight.

Their arguments remained roughly the same as two years earlier. Anti-restrictionists repeatedly claimed that their status as economic pioneers entitled them access to Mexican labor. C. B. Moore, a representative of Southern California growers’ interests, argued that “25 years ago when the industrial East was building up the enormous industries they have, there was not very much question about immigration; and I doubt very much if any immigration laws regarding European immigration at that time could have been enacted. Likewise, we are a new country in the West; we are pioneers out there. This valley l

34 W. F. Cottingham to Box, 4 February 1928, folder 9, box 2, Weeks Papers.
35 Morrison Swift, “Strengthen the Immigration Law and Improve the American Race,” March 1926, folder 3 and C. M. Goethe to Box, 4 February 1928, folder 11, both in box 2, Weeks Papers.
36 Reisler, Sweat of Their Brow, 207.
represent has been built out of a desert in 25 years.”

Restrictionist efforts appeared to be gaining momentum; the Department of Labor firmly supported their position under the leadership of Secretary James J. Davis, who was once described by the journal *Eugenics* as “an exponent of restriction along scientific lines.” But the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior supported the anti-restrictionists. George C. Kreutzer, director of reclamation economics in the Department of the Interior, testified that his department had invested $38 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. They have withstood the period of depression and deflation following the war. If the labor conditions are seriously disturbed it would greatly affect the earning power of these enterprises.”

The most powerful and influential assistance for the anti-restrictionists, however, came from the State Department. Secretary Frank B. Kellogg complained, “This Government has questions of a most important and acute nature pending with Mexico and certain other countries of Latin America.” He argued that immigration restriction unnecessarily jeopardized negotiations over land claims of U.S. citizens left over from the Mexican Revolution, trade relations, and many other issues brought to the fore in the 1920s and threatened to derail a number of international agreements. In an appearance before the Senate Immigration Committee, Kellogg explained that Mexico was the only nation in the Western Hemisphere that presented immigration problems and that restrictionists overstated those problems. He echoed the homing pigeon analogy long used by anti-restrictionists.

On the strength of Kellogg’s testimony and the considerable clout of agricultural interests, the quota bills again died in committee, however, the State Department acted quickly in order to appease the defeated nativists. Beginning in April 1928, Kellogg ordered consuls in Mexico “to exercise greater care in issuing immigration visas and to refuse visas to all applicants not entitled to them under the law.” According to the chief of the visa office, “it became apparent that many of the aliens entering on our southern border became public charges after their arrival here; moreover, many of them appeared to be subject to exclusion because of the practice which has grown up along the southern border of importing large numbers of aliens after solicitation and promises

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37 *Restriction of Western Hemisphere Immigration: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration . . . , 70th Cong. 60 (1928)* (statement of C. B. Moore). For more on anti-restrictionists as pioneers of the emerging western economy, see ibid., statements of Senator John B. Kendrick, 69–72; Alfred P. Thom, 87–99; and E. E. McInnis, 99–109.

38 Reisler, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 206 and *Restriction of Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 184 (statement of George C. Kreutzer).

39 Frank B. Kellogg quoted in Reisler, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 211.

Rather than wait for a quota bill to reemerge, the State Department informed its officials in Mexico to more rigorously enforce contract labor and “likely to become a public charge” exclusions. These administrative changes resulted in a sharp decline in visas and legal entries from Mexico. In essence, the department sought to stop Box and his supporters from pushing for legislation by achieving similar results administratively. Like 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 to avoid the bureaucratic hoops altogether and simply enter without legal sanction.

But the federal government did more than tighten visa restrictions. The Department of Labor and the Immigration Service began large-scale deportations of Mexicans from South Texas. In fabricating a crime wave to help pave the way for future legislation, they chose South Texas because it had the largest Mexican-origin population. Every single Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 contained a call for the inclusion of the Western Hemisphere under the quota restrictions. For instance, Harry E. Hull, the commissioner general of immigration, stated in 1927, “I can not reconcile the unlimited flow of immigrants from the Western Hemisphere with the sharp curtailment of immigrants from Europe.” More importantly, in each annual report from 1929 to 1932, when deportations reached their peak, the commissioner general went out of his way to detail the percentage of immigration crimes committed by Mexicans, using Box's tactic from the 1926 hearings. Similar numbers were not provided for natives of any other nation. In 1929 Hull reported that during the previous fiscal year, “The total deportees of the criminal and immoral classes for the past year was 1,856, the Mexicans alone numbering 1,000 or 53.9 per cent.”

They hoped to build a stronger numerical case for quota restrictions on Mexican immigration even as the State Department tried to undercut that possibility.

One of the earliest deportation drives occurred in May 1928, in the vicinity of the Rio Grande Valley town of Donna. Near the end of the month, the San Antonio district director of the immigration office 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

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not laborers, some prostitutes, some criminals." 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." Congressman John N. 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.\footnote{Statements of William Whalen and T. W. Hooks, 26 May 1928; statement of Mrs. M. M. Huffer, 26 May 1928; and George Harris to John Garner, 12 June 1928, all file 55609/358, box 438, Policy Files.}

In April 1929, the district director of the Brownsville immigration office reported that the district had deported more than 2,600 people to Mexico while hundreds remained in custody awaiting deportation. Almost 20,000 were deported from the Rio Grande Valley in 1929 alone. These raids had the predictable result of sowing fear in Mexican and Mexican American communities in the area, with many refusing to leave their homes. The author of an article in the \textit{San Antonio Express} on 20 October 1929 (nine days before the stock market crash) complained, "Families are being torn apart, husbands and wives separated, parents taken from young children, homes and farms abandoned, as thousands and thousands of Mexican people are deported from the American borderland, into Mexico—into their native land, but one which has become practically a foreign country to them." Even worse, the author claimed, "The fact that there are about 30,000 Mexicans in this section alone who are subject to deportation, for having crossed the Rio Grande on a short visit, or for inability to read, or for some other reason, has made it possible for a sort of terrorism to flourish among the Mexicans themselves." Colonel Sam Robertson, a South Texas land speculator and prominent political figure, explained, "The Mexican people were in this land long before the Americans owned it, and before they were here in any numbers. We are now doing what the English did to the French in Acadia. We are deporting these people from land which we took from them, and it is contrary to the principles of American justice." Rather than actual justice, however, Robertson sought labor, and he saw the deportation drives as a clear extension of the efforts for legislative restrictionism. He referenced the Immigration Act of 1917 when he complained, "Corns on their hands are a better recommendation than ability to do a little reading." But the immediate impetus for the drives was clear:

> With the beginning of agitation for the Box Bill, which would limit Mexican immigration, but would not limit immigration from Canada, the application of more strict immigration regulations was started along the border. . . . The Valley and all the border states are conducting an unceasing campaign against the Box Bill, declaring it would cut off their supply of labor, which is being sadly depleted now by deportations.\footnote{R. Reynolds McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation During the Great Depression" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1982), 109; Balderrama and Rodríguez, \textit{Decade of Betrayal}, 49; and "Exodus Across Border Will Create Acute Labor Shortage for Planters—Mexico Liable to}
Robertson and his fellow agribusiness barons complained about the injustice that threatened the integrity of Mexican and Mexican American communities, but they clearly cared more about the implications for their own surplus labor supply.  

The 1928 and 1929 raids primarily targeted Mexican neighborhoods and workplaces. One exception occurred in Brownsville in 1929, when Border Patrol agents arrested and deported a number of Mexicans waiting for documents outside of the Mexican consulate. Tactics changed, however, after the stock market crash and the depression that followed. With stronger economic justification added to the restrictionist logic of the first deportations, raids shifted to places like hospitals and health clinics. One particularly shocking raid in March 1931 involved immigration officials launching raids on El Paso public schools, resulting in the detention of more than 500 schoolchildren. Whole communities were uprooted as deportation rates continued to accelerate. These arrests almost always occurred without warrants and often came through coerced confessions and guilty pleas. By the end of 1931, however, deportations from the Rio Grande Valley declined as the Border Patrol and the Immigration Service shifted their focus to other parts of the state and the country. 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.

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-Anglo) immigrants might drain public coffers through relief payments led federal, state, and local officials to carry out well-publicized deportation campaigns throughout the nation after two years of trial-and-error operations in South Texas.
In many ways, pro-immigration forces of the 1910s and 1920s rationalized the necessity and even the righteousness of deportation during the 1930s. Their contention that Mexicans possessed an innate homing instinct became the self-fulfilling justification for removing them. Restrictionists and anti-restrictionists came to the same conclusions during the Depression. The workers who had been so sought after during the farm boom in the Southwest and in sugar beet regions 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.

As a number of historians have pointed out in recent years, the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924 did not apply quotas to Mexican immigration but did create the issue of unauthorized entry from Mexico. In fact, all of the nations of the Western Hemisphere escaped strict numerical limitations to immigration, but the obstacles to legal entry grew regardless. Head taxes, visa fees, and literacy tests were added to older exclusions against Asians, contract laborers, prostitutes, and the catchall designation of “likely to become a public charge.” Many immigrants and longtime residents of the borderlands found these new restrictions easier to avoid than obey. As enforcement of these laws increased, however, especially after the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924, law enforcement and the general public increasingly saw Mexicans as the archetypal illegal immigrants.

This image of Mexicans (and Mexican Americans) as potential—even probable—unauthorized entrants fueled debates over policy and the very nature of Mexican immigration and Mexican immigrants. Restrictionists claimed that Mexicans represented a racial threat to the United States that could weaken its democratic institutions and degrade its Anglo-Protestant culture. Anti-restrictionists did not necessarily consider Mexicans capable of democratic self-governance, but instead argued that they would remain eternally separate from the dominant culture—a cost of doing business. Neither side truly desired an immigration policy regarding Mexico. Anti-restrictionists wanted a labor policy that masqueraded as an immigration policy while restrictionists just wanted to throw up a wall as they searched for the next group of threatening immigrants. Both sides prepared the ground for the deportation campaigns by continually declaring that Mexicans were not really immigrants at all, making their expulsion seem less an issue of inherent rights and more a logical act of political expediency. They also ignored entirely the voices of the Mexican-origin population, presenting them as little more than caricatures or straw men—pliant beasts of burden or a future race problem—without any option in between.

The debates that ensued after 1924 focused essentially on whether it was possible or desirable to allow for the rights and citizenship of Mexican-origin people through the lens of economic calculation. By the time of the Great Depression, these
changes helped solidify a distinctly separate-but-unequal social sphere for Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States. Calls for immigration restriction and the looming threat of deportation 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. Fixating on the Great Depression as the short-term cause of these problems, however, ignores the much longer trajectory of anti-Mexican nativism and the way in which Mexican immigration has always lain outside the normal workings of U.S. immigration law.