

Mexican Labor in 1920s

Central Historical Question:

What was life like for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the 1920s?

Materials:

- United Streaming Video Segment: “Flotsam and Jetsam” (from Destination: America: Episode 01: The Golden Door)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=3EEC02E8-0F65-4E75-807F-EBAE0DF1B28F&blnFromSearch=1&productcode=US>
- Mexican Labor Document Set A-C
- Mexican Labor Graphic Organizer
- United Streaming Video Segment: “Pendulum” (from Destination: America: Episode 01: The Golden Door) (stop after about 2:30 minutes)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=a43717b6-d1a7-46a5-8b14-66b8d88456c5> (OPTIONAL)

Plan of Instruction:

1. Intro: Play United Streaming Video Segment: “Flotsam and Jetsam” (from Destination: America: Episode 01: The Golden Door)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=3EEC02E8-0F65-4E75-807F-EBAE0DF1B28F&blnFromSearch=1&productcode=US>

Ask students to answer the following question as they watch:

- What immigration laws were passed in the 1920s?
- What effect did the Immigration Act of 1924 have on Mexican immigration?
- What was life like for Mexican immigrants in the 1920s?

2. Explain inquiry:

History textbooks don't say much about the experience of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States between the years of 1848, when the Mexican-American war ended, and 1942, after WWII began and Mexicans were brought in as contract workers through the Bracero Program.

This absence calls for you to think like a historian. We know that tens of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans lived in the United States after the Mexican War, but we don't have a very clear sense of what life was like.

Today, you're going to try to paint a picture of what life was like for Mexican workers during the 1920s. Think about whether these sources provide reliable information about the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

3. Hand out Documents A-C and Graphic Organizer. Read directions together and have students complete in groups.
4. Discussion:
 - What was life like for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans during the 1920s?
 - Do students trust the information in these documents? Why or why not?
 - What additional information would students want to have in order to paint a more reliable picture of Mexican American life in the 1920s?
 - The Great Depression began in 1929. What do you predict happened to Mexicans and Mexican Americans during this time?
5. If time remains, show the beginning of United Streaming Video Segment: **Pendulum:** (from Destination: America: Episode 01: The Golden Door) (stop after about 2:30 minutes)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=a43717b6-d1a7-46a5-8b14-66b8d88456c5>

Citations:

Paul Taylor, Interviews with Mexican Immigrants in Chicago,
http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org/3_mexcom.html

“Corrido Pensilvanio,” from Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, Vol II. Berkeley: University of California, 1931. <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=927>

William D. Carrigan, “The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 To 1928.” *Journal of Social History*, 2003.

DOCUMENT A

Paul Taylor writes: The interviews took place at one of the railroad labor camps of a type frequently seen in and near Chicago. The camp consists of old box cars taken from their tracks. Additions have in some cases been built to provide extra rooms, covered porches, or open floors. There are gardens, chickens, and even pigs, with the usual cats and dogs. The first man I spoke to had a box car with the addition of a covered porch and a screen for flies. His wife was sick but the rest of the family was well.

I left Mexico in 1919, when there was good work in Texas. My first job was digging ditches. The good work lasted about a year and a half. Then I was laid off. So were many, many Mexicans. Some of them had worked there a long time but they kept the Americans. It made some of us mad but what could we do? Nothing.

I went North to Detroit in hope things would be better. Then to Pittsburgh. But they were worse. In 1923, I came to Chicago and worked for the steel mills. I like the work there. It pays well. It is very hot and heavy but I could stand that. Then I was laid off. I did not work for three months and I was desperate. Finally I landed here. I have been here four years.

The track work does not pay so well but it is steady. Out here we get our coal and water free. That makes it very nice in the winter. In the summer we have ice and that is a great luxury. We have no rent bill to pay and that makes it very much better than in town. There is always plenty of fresh air and sunshine and the children like it here because they can play in the open country.

We get *La Prensa* here and when I finish reading it I pass it to someone else. One man gets a paper from Los Angeles in California. That is a pretty place and I have often heard so much about it. There are many Mexicans there and we hear from them very often. Many of the people around here would like to go there. They say the people down there are so very happy and it is not cold like it is here.

Source: Between 1927-1930, sociologist Paul Taylor conducted interviews with Mexican immigrants living in Chicago. The interview above was probably conducted in 1928.

DOCUMENT B: “Corrido Pensilvanio”

<p>El 28 de Abril A las seis de la mañana Salimos en un enganche Para el estado de Pensilvania.</p>	<p>On the 28th of April At six o'clock in the morning We set out under contract For the state of Pennsylvania.</p>
<p>Mi chinita me decía Yo me voy en esa agencia- Para lavarle su ropa Para darle su asistencia.</p>	<p>My little sweetheart said to me, “I’m going into that office- And say I’ll wash your clothes And take care of you.”</p>
<p>El enganchista me dijo, No laves a tu familia Para no pasar trabajo Es en el estado de West Virginia.</p>	<p>The contractor said to me, “Don’t take your family Or you’ll pass up this job It’s in the state of West Virginia.”</p>
<p>Para que sepas que te quiero Me dejas en Fort Worth Y cuando ya estes trabajando Me escribes de donde estes.</p>	<p>“So you’ll know that I love you, When you leave me in Fort Worth, And you have started working, Write me from where you are.</p>
<p>Adios Fort Worth y Dallas, Por no de mucha importancia Yo me voy para Pensilvania Por no andar en la vagancia.</p>	<p>Goodbye, Fort Worth and Dallas, You’re not much to me now, I’m going to Pennsylvania To be a vagrant no more.</p>
<p>Al llegar al steel mill worque, Que vemos la locomotora Y salimos corriendo Ochenta millas por hora!</p>	<p>When we got to the steel works We saw the locomotive And we came running At eighty miles an hour!</p>
<p>Cuando llegamos alla Y del tren nos bajamos, Preguntan las italianas, De donde vienen, Mexicanos?</p>	<p>When we arrived there And got off the train The Italian girls asked us, “Where do you come from, Mexicans?”</p>
<p>Responden los Mexicanos Los que ya saben “inglear” Venimos en un engache Del pueblo de Fort Worth</p>	<p>The Mexicans reply, Those who know how “to English,” “We come out under contract From the town of Forth Worth.”</p>

Source: A corrido is a Mexican narrative song or ballad that is passed around in the oral tradition. The corrido highlights important social, political and cultural issues that affect Mexican and Mexican American communities.

DOCUMENT C: Lynching

In September 1911, four hundred Mexican activists assembled in Laredo, Texas. The delegates denounced the brutal oppression of their people that had continued unchecked since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). It was agreed to establish a new civil rights organization with the purpose of protecting its members against white injustice. La Grán Liga Mexicanista de Beneficiencia y Protección intended to attract the support of wealthy philanthropists and the liberal press in order "to strike back at the hatred of some bad sons of Uncle Sam who believe themselves better than the Mexicans because of the magic that surrounds the word *white*".

In 1929, Mexicans founded another defense agency, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). LULAC organizers experienced difficulty mobilizing Mexican Americans, especially in small towns and remote rural areas. The only way to prevent further lynchings was for Mexicans to rally in protest. Yet it was the very fear of mob violence that frightened [many] into silence.

Decade		Population
1850	Population of U.S. born in Mexico	13, 317
1880	Population of U.S. born in Mexico	68,399
1880	Population of U.S. born in U.S. (Mexican descent)	83, 599
1880	Total born in Mexico OR Mexican descent	151, 998
1930	Population of U.S. born in Mexico	641, 462
1930	Population of U.S. born in U.S. (Mexican descent)	781, 071
1930	Total born in Mexico OR Mexican descent	1,422, 533
	Estimated average Mexican population, 1880-1930	787,266
	Estimated # of Mexicans Lynched in U.S. 1882-1930	216
	"Lynching rate" for Mexicans (per 100,000 people)	27.4
	Estimated average African American pop. 1882-1930	9,138,723
	Estimated # of African Americans Lynched 1882-1930	3,386
	"Lynching rate" for African Americans (per 100,000 people)	37.1

Source: "The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 To 1928," William D. Carrigan. *Journal of Social History*, 2003.