

Border Journeys



THE year is 1923; the place Gómez Palacios in the Mexican state of Durango. As she watched her mother pack a few belongings, Jesusita Torres was warned by her mother Pasquala Esparza not to tell anyone of their plans. Several days later, shortly before noon, Pasquala would sneak out of the family home with nine-year-old Jesusita at her side and one-month-old Raquel in her arms. They headed for the train station with Pasquala surveying the landscape for any signs of her husband or his relations. She must have breathed a sigh of relief as the train began its journey to Ciudad Juárez from which she hoped to cross with her children into the United States.

During our interview seventy years later, Señora Torres would reveal that her stepfather (Raquel's biological father) in Gómez Palacios had been cruel to her and her mother. In her words:

I never knew my father. . . . My mother got married again and things did not work. I guess they did not work because I was mistreated, too, you know. So I think the only way she could get away was to come over here.¹

Pasquala intended to stay in Juárez until she had the money to secure passports for herself and her children. Her destination was El Monte, California, to live with her married sister.

That same year in the village of San Julián in the Los Altos region of Jalisco, Petra Sánchez made plans to return to the United States with her husband Ramón, their three infants (two-year-old Guadalupe, one-year-old Librado, and newborn Margarita) and five-year-old José, the son of Ramón and his late wife Guadalupe Rocha. The villagers of San Julián may have thought Petra and Ramón an unusual couple. Theirs had not been a conventional courtship. Ramón's late wife Guadalupe had been Petra's older sister. When Guadalupe and her daughter Ampelia succumbed to the global influenza outbreak of 1918, Ramón decided that he and José should live with the Rochas. Whether by choice or arrangement, Ramón and Petra married in 1920 and then the newlyweds journeyed to California. Laboring as berry pickers in the vicinity of Buena Park, they hoped to make enough to return to San Julián with a nice nest egg. They arrived back to the village in 1923, but within a year the couple decided to make California their home.² Their second migration was marked by tragedy. When Ramón moved ahead to Buena Park leaving his family temporarily behind with his brother, baby Margarita died and, as Librado would later recall to his niece Marjorie Sánchez-Walker, "mother was alone . . . when Margarita died." By 1924, Ramón, Petra, and their increasing family worked in the fields of Knott's Berry Farm. About fifty miles to the north in El Monte, Pasquala and her daughter Jesusita would also be picking berries.³

Jesusita Torres and Petra Sánchez were part of the first modern wave of Mexican immigration to the United States. The society they entered was one already marked by multiple conquests, migrations, and overlapping patriarchies. As previously mentioned, Spanish-speaking women migrated north from Mexico decades, even centuries before their Euro-American counterparts ventured west. Most arrived as the wives or daughters of soldiers, farmers, and artisans. Over the course of three centuries, they raised families on the frontier and worked alongside their fathers or husbands, herding cattle and tending crops.⁴

Women's networks based on ties of blood and fictive kinship proved central to the settlement of the Spanish/Mexican frontier. At times women settlers acted as midwives to mission Indians and baptized sickly or stillborn babies. As godmothers for these infants, they established the bonds of *compadrazgo* between Native American and Spanish/Mexican women.⁵ However, exploitation took place among women. For those in domestic service, racial and class hierarchies undermined any pretense of sisterhood. While the god-

parent relationship could foster ties between colonists and Native Americans, elites used baptism as a venue of social control. Indentured servitude was prevalent on the colonial frontier and persisted well into the nineteenth century.⁶

Spanish/Mexican settlement has been shrouded by myth. Walt Disney's *Zorro*, for example, epitomized the notion of romantic California controlled by fun-loving, swashbuckling rancheros. Since only 3 percent of California's Spanish/Mexican population could be considered rancheros in 1850, most women did not preside over large estates, but helped manage small family farms.⁷ Married women on the Spanish/Mexican frontier had certain legal advantages not afforded their Euro-American peers. Under English common law, women, when they married, became *feme covert* (or dead in the eyes of the legal system) and thus could not own property separate from their husbands. Conversely, Spanish/Mexican women retained control of their land after marriage and held one-half interest in the community property they shared with their spouses.⁸

Life for Mexican settlers changed dramatically in 1848 with the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War, the discovery of gold in California, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexicans on the U.S. side of the border became second-class citizens, divested of their property and political power. Their world turned upside down. Segregated from the Euro-American population, Mexican Americans in the barrios of the Southwest sustained their sense of identity and cherished their traditions. With little opportunity for advancement, Mexicans were concentrated in lower-echelon industrial, service, and agricultural jobs.⁹ A few elite families, especially in New Mexico, retained their land and social standing. This period of conquest, physical and ideological, did not occur in a dispassionate environment. Stereotypes affected rich and poor alike, with Mexicans commonly described as lazy, sneaky, and greasy. In Euro-American journals, novels, and travelogues, Spanish-speaking women were frequently depicted as flashy, morally deficient sirens.¹⁰

Providing insight into community life, nineteenth-century Spanish language newspapers reveal ample information on social mores. Newspaper editors upheld the double standard. Women were to be cloistered and protected to the extent that some residents of New Mexico and Arizona protested the establishment of coeducational public schools.¹¹

Despite prevailing conventions, most Mexican women, because of economic circumstances, sought employment for wages.

Whether in cities or on farms, family members pooled their earnings to put food on the table. Women worked at home taking in laundry, boarders, and sewing while others worked in the fields, in restaurants and hotels, and in canneries and laundries.¹² As sisters, cousins, and comadres, women relied on one another for mutual support. In the words of New Mexico native Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, "The women . . . had to be resourceful in every way. They were their own doctors, dressmakers, tailors, and advisers."¹³ Wage work and mutual assistance were survival strategies that persisted well into the twentieth century across region and generation.

Between 1910 and 1930, over one million Mexicanos (one-eighth to one-tenth of Mexico's population) migrated "al otro lado." Arriving in the United States, often with their dreams and little else, these immigrants settled into existing communities and created new ones in the Southwest and Midwest. In 1900, from 375,000 to perhaps as many as 500,000 Mexicans lived in the Southwest. Within a short space of twenty years, Mexican Americans were outnumbered at least two to one and their colonias became immigrant enclaves. In some areas, this transformation appeared even more dramatic. Los Angeles, for example, had a Mexican population ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 in 1900. By 1930, approximately 150,000 people of Mexican birth or heritage resided in the city's expanding barrios.¹⁴ As David Gutiérrez has so persuasively argued, immigration from Mexico in the twentieth century has had profound consequences for Mexican Americans in terms of "daily decisions about who they are—politically, socially, and culturally—in comparison to more recent immigrants from Mexico." Indeed, a unique layering of generations has occurred in which ethnic/racial identities take many forms—from the Hispanos of New Mexico and Colorado whose roots go back to the eighteenth century to the recently arrived who live as best they can in the canyons of northern San Diego County.¹⁵

Such a heterogeneous Mexican community is not new. Throughout the twentieth century, a layering of generations can be detected in schools, churches, community organizations, work sites, and neighborhoods. Writing about San Bernardino in the 1940s, Ruth Tuck offered the following illustration:

There is a street . . . on which three families live side by side. The head of one family is a naturalized citizen, who arrived here eighteen years ago; the head of the second is an alien who came . . . in 1905; the head of the third is the descendant of people who

came . . . in 1843. All of them, with their families, live in poor housing; earn approximately \$150 a month as unskilled laborers; send their children to "Mexican" schools; and encounter the same sort of discriminatory practices.¹⁶

Inheriting a legacy of colonialism wrought by Manifest Destiny, Mexicans, regardless of nativity, found themselves segmented into low-paying, low-status jobs with few opportunities for advancement. Living in segregated barrios, they formed neighborhood associations and church groups, and created a community life predicated on modes of production, economic and cultural.

This chapter surveys women's border journeys first in terms of migration and settlement followed by patterns of daily life. The ways in which women as farm worker mothers, railroad wives, and miners' daughters negotiated a variety of constraints (economic, racial, and patriarchal) are at the heart of the narrative. Mexicanas claimed a space for themselves and their families building community through mutual assistance while struggling for some semblance of financial stability, especially in the midst of rising nativist sentiments that would crest in the deportations and repatriations of the early 1930s. Whether living in a labor camp, a boxcar settlement, mining town, or urban barrio, Mexican women nurtured families, worked for wages, built fictive kin networks, and participated in formal and informal community associations. Through chain and circular migrations of families, community and kin networks intertwined. In Riverside, California, for example, the Eastside barrio by the 1960s had so many members of a single extended family that Ray Buriel recalled how he and his buddies had to venture into the rival barrio Casa Blanca to get dates.¹⁷

Chain and circular migrations, of course, begin with the act of crossing the political border separating Mexico and the United States.¹⁸ In writing the history of Mexican immigration, scholars generally work within a "push/pull" model.¹⁹ What material conditions facilitated migration and what expectations did people carry with them as they journeyed north? Between 1875 and 1910, the Mexican birthrate soared, resulting in a 50 percent increase in population. Food prices also spiraled. While dictator Porfirio Díaz has been credited with the modernization of Mexico, his economic policies decimated the lives of Mexican rural villagers as they were displaced from their *ejidos* (communal land holdings) by commercial (often corporate American) agricultural interests. Perhaps as many as five million people lost access to their ancestral lands. In

the words of historian Devra Weber, "The independent Mexican peasantry disappeared, and by 1910 over nine and a half million people, 96 percent of Mexican families, were landless." By 1900, American-built and financed railroads offered mass transportation in Mexico. Since the major rail lines ran north and south (to make connections with lines on the U.S. side), hopping a train to the border was a realistic and accessible option.²⁰

Beginning with the Madero uprising of 1910, the Mexican Revolution also spurred migration to the United States. Claiming the lives of an estimated one to two million people, the ten-year bloody civil war wreaked economic, political, and social chaos. Starvation was not unknown and danger a constant companion. Marauders and soldiers raped and kidnapped young women. Elsie González recalled how her grandmother had protected her sister from soldiers by throwing a wicker hamper over her and sitting on top of it until the men had left. The *soldaderas*, whether as wives, sweethearts, or paid service workers or as women who fought in their own right in their own units, shouldered multiple responsibilities in the course of a single day.²¹ Although only eight years old when Díaz was routed from power in 1911, Lucia R. had clear memories of the *soldaderas*:

They used to carry the whole house on their backs. In addition, they carried the small children and a rifle in case they had to tangle with the enemy, too. In a bucket they carried what was necessary to cook. Toward the end of the day, they would stop and set up camp and start dinner. *Pobrecitas*, they suffered a lot.²²

Although hostilities, for the most part, would cease in 1920, the economic aftershocks reverberated throughout the following decade. In addition, the Cristero Revolt prompted further emigration from 1925 to 1929. Several scholars have referred to the United States as a "safety valve" for Mexicanos seeking to escape the ravages of war. This metaphor is a good one, not only for *campesinos* and artisans, but for government officials, professionals, and the wealthy. Taking no chances, Señor Araiza, the mayor of Guadalupe I. Calvo, Chihuahua, wisely sent his wife and children to El Paso. He would never see his cherished family again as assassins would take his life during the course of the revolution.²³

Immigrants looked to the United States as a source of hope and employment. They soon discovered that material conditions did not match their expectations. The early quantitative studies of Al-

bert Camarillo, Ricardo Romo, and Mario Barrera sharply illuminated the economic and social stratification of Mexicans in the Southwest during the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁴ As examples, in 1930, the three most common occupations for Mexican men were in agriculture (45 percent), manufacturing (24 percent), and transportation (13 percent). Only 1 percent held professional positions. Women wage earners could frequently be found in the service sector (38 percent), in blue-collar employment (25 percent), and in agriculture (21 percent). Only 3 percent were considered professionals and 10 percent held clerical or sales positions.²⁵ The following discussion sketches out in the broadest strokes the occupational niches of Mexican immigrants and their families in the United States.

With the advent of reclamation and irrigation projects and World War I, commercial agriculture in the Southwest boomed at the same time that restrictive mandates against Asian immigration contributed to "a relatively diminishing supply of workers." Growers avidly recruited Mexicanos, promising wages that seemed extraordinary to *campesinos*. Lawrence Cardoso indicated that in Mexico, field workers could earn twelve cents per day while in the U.S. Southwest daily wages for similar work ranged from \$1.00 to \$3.50. By 1930, according to a U.S. Chamber of Commerce report, Mexican agricultural workers earned from \$2.75 to \$6.00 per day.²⁶ The Utah-Idaho Sugar Company contract dated March 14, 1918, signed by Severiano Rodríguez stipulated that workers would be paid \$7.00 per acre for blocking and thinning; \$2.50 and \$1.50 per acre for the first and second hoeing, and \$10.00 per acre for pulling, topping, and loading sugar beets. The honoring of such wages could be another matter altogether. In 1919, a representative of the Mexican ambassador to the United States would call on the Commissioner General of Immigration to investigate the physical conditions of compatriots employed by the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company based on materials the Mexican embassy had received from Señor Rodríguez in which he explained that 500 families "have been left in a very precarious situation."²⁷

Mexicans provided the sinew and muscle on ranches and farms throughout the West. Historian Camille Guerin-Gonzales indicates that "by 1920, Mexicans formed the largest single ethnic group among farm workers in California, and during the 1920s, they became the mainstay of California large-scale, specialty group agriculture." Pioneering economist Paul Taylor found in Nueces County, Texas, that Mexicans formed 97 percent of the farm labor

force. In Arizona, 80 percent of the year-round or "resident" farm workers were Mexican.²⁸ Migrating into the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain states, Spanish-speaking workers could also be found in such disparate places as Nyssa, Oregon, Blackfoot, Idaho, and Green River, Wyoming. Forming over 65 percent of the sugar beet harvesters, Mexican communities also emerged in Michigan and Minnesota. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce related that by 1930 Mexicans picked "more than eighty percent of the perishable commodities produced in the Southwest."²⁹

The railroads also provided employment. According to Jeff Garcilazo, Mexicanos composed from "about fifty to seventy percent of the track crews on the major western lines." Labor contractors for both agribusiness and the railroads traveled to the interior of Mexico to recruit workers holding out such inducements as high wages, free transportation, and housing. More frequently, such agents competed with one another in the border city of El Paso.³⁰ The border journey of the Vásquez family serves as an example. Recruited by the Rock Island Railroad in Sinaloa, Guanajuato, in 1907, Felix Vásquez and his wife Frederica made their way north. Their first two children were born in Mexico and then a daughter, Euesbia, in El Paso. Laboring on the track, Vásquez with his family migrated from boxcar colonia to boxcar colonia into Arizona, New Mexico, Iowa, Kansas (where they celebrated the birth of another daughter), and then settled in Silvis, Illinois, outside Chicago, the birthplace of four younger children. The boxcar communities could move at a moment's notice or become permanent settlements. Midwest rail lines also relied on Mexican labor since over 40 percent of their workers in the Chicago-Gary region were Mexican. In 1927, wages in the rail yards of Detroit averaged \$4.00 per day and Mexican rail hands could be found as far east as Pittsburgh.³¹

Mining and industrial jobs were other "pull" occupations. By 1910, Arizona had become "the nation's number one producer of copper" and the Rockefellers' Colorado Fuel and Iron Company had irrevocably altered the southern Colorado landscape with coal mines. In both states, a layering of generations occurred similar to urban areas of the Southwest with Mexicano migrants living and working alongside native-born Mexican Americans. By the mid-1920s, daily wages averaged from \$2.75 to \$4.95 for Mexican miners in Arizona.³² Heavy industry in the Midwest also recruited Mexican labor, with Bethlehem Steel in Pennsylvania the most notable example; in the Southwest, construction firms depended on Mexicanos. In *Mexican Immigration to the United States* (1930), an-

thropologist Manuel Gamio indicated that money orders to Mexico originated from such unlikely places as Nebraska and New York. The grandfather of Chicana artist Yolanda López, for example, made his living as a tailor in New York City. As Francisco Calderama and Raymond Rodríguez astutely observed, "By the 1920s Mexicans could be found harvesting sugar beets in Minnesota, laying track in Kansas, packing meat in Chicago, mining coal in Oklahoma, assembling cars in Detroit, canning fish in Alaska, and sharecropping in Louisiana."³³

Migration within the United States was common and the Vásquez family journey to Silvis exemplifies the stepping-stone route to the Midwest. However, most new arrivals lingered closer to the border. Coming from every Mexican state with a substantial proportional from the central plateau regions of Michoacan, Jalisco, and Guanajuato, 80 percent of this population, by 1930, lived in the states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado.³⁴

The experiences of women who journeyed north alone or only in the company of their children have received scant scholarly attention. In separate studies, however, Devra Weber and I have found numerous examples of women, like Pasquala Esparza, who arrived *al otro lado* on their own. Manuel Gamio also documents their experiences, here and there, in his field notes housed at the Bancroft Library as well as in excerpts published in his *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*. The records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, especially the transcripts of the Boards of Special Inquiry, lend insight into the lives of those who came as *solas* or as single mothers.³⁵

Gender marked one's reception at the Stanton Street Bridge linking Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, especially if one ventured alone. Men would hear the competing pitches of labor contractors promising high wages and assorted benefits. Conversely, immigration inspectors routinely stopped those considered "likely to become a public charge"—in other words *solas* and single mothers. Agents scrutinized passport applications and conducted special hearings to determine women's eligibility for entrance into the United States.³⁶

Arriving in Ciudad Juárez with a nine-year-old daughter and a four-week-old infant, Pasquala Esparza discovered she did not have the necessary funds to obtain the proper passports in El Paso so she stayed in Ciudad Juárez, finding a job as a housekeeper and a room in a boardinghouse. The landlady promised to look in on her

daughters while Pasquala worked; however, it was nine-year-old Jesusita who shouldered the responsibility for herself and her sister. Jesusita remembered that as part of her daily routine she would carry Raquel a long distance to an affluent home where their mother worked. After preparing the noon meal for her employer, Pasquala would anxiously wait by the kitchen door. When her children arrived, she quickly and quietly ushered them into the kitchen. While nursing Raquel, she fed Jesusita a burrito of leftovers. Then Jesusita would take her baby sister into her arms and trek back to the boardinghouse to await their mother's return in the evening. One can only imagine her fears as she negotiated the streets of a strange city, a hungry child carrying a hungry baby. After six months, Pasquala had made enough money to complete the journey to California.³⁷

Immigration agents, however, still remained suspicious of a woman unaccompanied by a man. On their next attempt to cross, even with cash in hand, Pasquala and her family were denied a regular passport. Desperate, but not helpless, she secured a local passport generally reserved for Juárez residents who worked in El Paso and in that way she and her children crossed the border.³⁸

Another strategy employed by women involved direct confrontation with immigration officers. Journalist John Reed recorded an incident in which a woman was queried about the contents of her *rebozo*. "She slowly opened the front of her dress and answered placidly: 'I don't know, señor. It may be a girl and it may be a boy.'"³⁹ During a Board of Special Inquiry in Nogales, Arizona, twenty-four-year-old Trinidad Orellana refused to be intimidated as she and her fourteen-year-old sister Beatriz attempted to join their mother and two sisters who worked as actors at the Star Theatre in El Paso. Perhaps aware of the suspicion with which actors were held, Trinidad adopted a defiant stance. A portion of her testimony follows:

ORELLANA: No, my brother is not an actor.

HEARING OFFICER: What is he?

ORELLANA: He is a mechanic.

HEARING OFFICER: What kind of mechanic?

ORELLANA: You ask him.⁴⁰

Shortly after this exchange, an exasperated immigration agent declared, "Do you want to answer these questions . . . or do you want to stop right now?" Appearing as a witness, her brother Alfonso took

a deferential position, emphasizing the strong transnational family bond, his fitness as a breadwinner, and his desire for U.S. citizenship. In granting the Orellana sisters admittance, the transcript reveals an odd rationale for Trinidad's testimony.

It was thought at first from the manner of answering that there was something wrong . . . but the Board finally decided that she was just ignorant or frightened. There is nothing in her appearance to indicate that she is connected to the theatrical profession or anything other than a plain seamstress as she claims to be.⁴¹

Whether Trinidad Orellana's "performance" at the hearing had been carefully scripted or not, it seems interesting that she and her brother articulated reverse gender expectations—she assertive, he accommodating. As significant, immigration agents attributed her unsettling testimony to being scared or backward rather than as a direct challenge to their authority. Perhaps being caught off guard worked to the sisters' advantage, for three weeks later the El Paso office would chastise the Nogales agents for making such a hasty decision with respect to the Orellanas.⁴²

The Immigration Act of 1917, which included provisions for a literacy test and a head tax, made circular migration more difficult. Historian George Sánchez contends that these measures along with harassment by border agents contributed to a pattern of more permanent settlement. Especially after its passage, immigrants arriving in El Paso (the Ellis Island for Mexicanos) encountered a daunting and demeaning reception. According to Balderrama and Rodríguez, "All immigrants, men, women, and children, were herded into crowded, examination pens. As many as five hundred to six hundred persons were detained there for endless hours without benefit of drinking fountains or toilet facilities." Immigrants were also required to remove their clothing to hand over to officials for disinfecting. They received medical examinations and were then herded through a public bath. Associating immigrants with outbreaks of influenza, border agents perceived themselves as acting in the public interest, but for the individuals undergoing such treatment the humiliation remained a searing memory: "They disinfected us as if we were some kind of animals." Sánchez points out that this process was reserved only for poor migrants. Professional and elite exiles (and those who dressed to pass above their class) could forgo the literacy test, medical examination, and public bath.⁴³

Like those who arrived from Europe and Asia, Mexican immigrants dreamed of "a better life." Some were propelled by fantastic images of prosperity. Or as a verse from a popular corrido proclaimed, "For they told me that here the dollars were scattered about in heaps; That there were girls and theaters/And that here everything was good fun."⁴⁴ The manufactured fantasies of Hollywood also appealed to adventurous young women like Elisa Silva. Divorcing an abusive husband, Silva, her mother, and two sisters left Mazatlán for Los Angeles with the hope of "working as extras in the movies." However, once they arrived, they found work in different occupations. One sister worked as a seamstress, another attended business college, and Elisa earned \$20 to \$30 a week as a "dime a dance" partner in a local Mexican dance hall. Other women, like Pasquala Esparza, were not motivated by promises of fame and fortune; survival was their goal and, for many, the agricultural communities of Texas, California, and the Far West would be their new homes.⁴⁵

After the grueling journey, Pasquala and her children resided with her sister's family in El Monte, California. Living under one roof with her tios and her cousins, Jesusita and her mother worked in the berry fields from February through June; then journeyed with the relatives to the San Joaquin Valley where they would first pick grapes, then cotton. By November, the extended family would return to El Monte. "We didn't work November . . . December . . . January . . . But we used to buy our sack of beans . . . and we'd get our flour and we'd get our coffee and we'd get our rice so that we could live on those three months we didn't work."⁴⁶

It is a truism that family networks are central to American immigration history, but as I listened to Jesusita Torres, I wondered how observers, like 1930s' sociologist Ruth Allen, could have missed the complexities of extended family life when they interviewed Mexican farm workers. Indeed, Allen seemed to equate the fact that since growers paid the wages of all the family members in a lump sum to the head of household, such arrangements sat well in the minds of Mexican women, whom she believed clung to "traditions of feminine subservience." With thinly veiled contempt, Allen wrote:

The Mexican woman has been taught as her guide to conduct the vow of the Moabitess, 'Where thou goest, I will go.' Up and down the road she follows the men of her family. . . . The modern Woman Movement and demands for economic independence

have left her untouched. Uncomplainingly, she labors in the field for months at a time and receives as a reward from the head of the family some gew-gaw from the five and ten cent store, or, at best, a new dress. The supremacy of the male is seldom disputed.⁴⁷

The ethnocentric perceptions of this Texas professor signifies one end of the spectrum. On the opposite end reside rosy notions of happy extended families. While family and fictive kin may have eased the migrant journey and provided physical and emotional succor, human relationships are rarely perfect. Indeed, I too may be guilty of casting a fairly uncritical eye on extended family networks in *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*.⁴⁸ Bear in mind that the dynamics of power permeate the realm of decision-making whether one is situated at work or at home. We must move beyond a celebration of la familia to address questions of power and patriarchy, the gender politics of work and family.

Gender politics, however, is also enmeshed in economic and social stratification. Women like Jesusita Torres and her mother Pasquala lived and worked in extended family relationships often by necessity rather than choice. It was not until Pasquala secured employment at a walnut factory that she could save a portion of her wages and move her daughters and grandson out of her sister and brother-in-law's home. Although Señora Torres remembered that "when you live together, you think that they love you and you love them," she also revealed that her uncle's drinking took a toll on the family. "We couldn't sleep because they had to do their singing and their cussing . . . and we had a little corner in the kitchen where we slept."⁴⁹ Julia Luna Mount remembered her family going walnut picking "with a friend of a friend." In her words, "We slept on the floor in the living room. We suffered humiliations because we really had no place to go . . . and they made us feel very unwelcome."⁵⁰

Individual memories illuminate community histories. The following narrative reveals Mexican women's stories across region and occupation, examining their lives in agricultural colonias, boxcar barrios, and mining towns and focusing, in part, on the cultural construction of class. Just as women's work and family roles were intertwined, so too were the racial, economic, and patriarchal constraints they faced. Their legacies of resistance reveal their resiliency, determination, and strength.

A lifelong farm and nursery worker, Jesusita Torres stated simply:

It's hard when you don't have an education. You go to work and you always have to do the hardest work. I used to think, "If I ever have children, I'm gonna work so hard my children will NEVER do this."⁵¹

Migrant workers, both past and present, have occupied a vulnerable, precarious sector of the working class. Indeed, as an underclass of monopoly capitalism, frequently invisible in labor camps off the beaten track, farm workers have, in general, labored for low wages, under hazardous conditions, and with substandard housing and provisions. While individual qualities such as physical stamina and fortitude seem necessary for survival, a collective sense of family, neighborhood, and cultural bonds created thriving colonias among Mexican agricultural workers. In *Labor and Community*, historian Gilbert González meticulously reconstructs citrus communities in Orange County. Colonia residents may have depended on the growers for their livelihoods, but they developed their own local village structures and organizations, ones imbued with what Emilio Zamora has termed "an all-inclusive Mexicanist identity" rooted in nationalism and "working class values of fraternalism, reciprocity, and altruism." As Devra Weber argues in *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, "Segregation, working-class status, and the geographic mobility of Mexican men and women reinforced their identity as Mexicans . . . and reaffirmed the need to rely on each other in an Anglo-dominated society." She continued, "While aspects of mutual aid underlie any society, the importance of reciprocity was more powerful among immigrants."⁵²

But there is more to the story than collective identity, for the pallor of patriarchy must also be considered in exploring the lives of women agricultural workers. Rosalinda González contends that the organization of farm labor reinforced patriarchal tendencies within families. Women could labor for the *patrón* at work and the *patrón* at home. However, like their foremothers who migrated north during the frontier era, Mexicanas created their own worlds of influence predicated on women's networks, on ties of familial and fictive kin. *Commadrazgo* served as one of the undergirdings for general patterns of reciprocity as women cared for one another as family and neighbors.⁵³

As an example, Irene Castañeda recalled her mother's efforts as a midwife in South Texas:

Mother, from seeing the poor people die for lack of medical attention, wanted to do something to help them and she learned as best she could, to deliver babies. Sometimes on the floor with just

a small blanket. . . . Sometimes she would bring pillows or blankets from home—many of the women had not eaten—she would bring them rice from home and feed them by spoonfuls. The shots were a cup of hot pepper tea—to give strength for the baby to be born.⁵⁴

The family remained the unit of production in agricultural labor. For wives and mothers, the day began before sunrise as they prepared the *masa* for fresh tortillas. In an interview with Gilbert González, Julia Aguirre remembered how her mother prepared tortillas on top of a steel barrel that she had improvised as a stove. As a child, Clemente Linares worked with a short-handle hoe in the beet fields of Montana. He recalled the "double day" existence of his mother who labored all day in the fields and returned to a full evening of chores. After dinner, "She would work on the washing board and tub. She had to heat the water on the stove and if there wasn't room for the water, they would heat the water outside on a fire." He continued, "She would spend half the night so she would be ready to go back to work the next morning." Drawing on a 1923 Department of Labor study, sociologists Mary Romero and Eric Margolis illuminate the double day among *campesinas* in the Colorado beet fields. "Only 14 of the 454 working mothers interviewed were relieved by other adults in the cooking and only 42 women were assisted by a child."⁵⁵

Paid by the acre, bin, or burlap bag, workers had their earnings tied to their abilities to pick with speed and skill, careful not to bruise the berries or puncture the tomatoes. Mothers with infants were not uncommon sights. Grace Luna related how women would scale ladders with 100 pounds of cotton on their backs and "some carried their kids on top of their picking sacks."⁵⁶ While Luna picked cotton in Madera, California, María Arredondo worked in a peach orchard little more than an hour's distance near the small town of Delhi. Reflecting on her experiences as a young mother coping with the realities of migrant life, she revealed:

In 1944 we camped in Delhi under trees and orchards in tents. We made a home. We had rocks already or bricks and cooked our food and got boxes for our table. . . . Martin [her son] suffered, he remembers. Picking peaches was the hardest job—I used to cry because my neck hurt, the big peaches were heavy. I [could] only fill the bag half way because I couldn't stand the pain. . . . We lived not too far [the bosses] and that is where we used to get our water. Restrooms—they were under the trees, in the field, or by the canal.⁵⁷

Migrant farm workers had little shelter from the extremes of heat or cold. With no labor camp in sight, Jesusita Torres dusted herself off and slept under trees. Clemente Linares recalled how the Montana winters would freeze the outdoor water pumps, but the ever-present snow, which seeped into the house from the cracks in the walls, did serve as his family's main source of water. Telling his daughter Lydia the proverbial story of walking over two miles to school in the snow, he declared, "That you didn't freeze to death was a miracle."⁵⁸ Conversely, in the poem "I Remember," Isabel Flores presents a limpid image of life in the fields on a hot summer day. A portion follows:

I remember
riding on my mother's
sacka
as she picked cotton in the middle of two
surcos
lonches
tortillas y frijoles
in an opened field
with the dust and the wind.

...
I remember
watching a cloud
slowly covering the sun
and giving thanks for the minutes
of shade.⁵⁹

Some children never made it to the fields. In 1938, a Michigan newspaper reported how, in the beet fields near Blissfield, company housing amounted to "hovels" with fifteen to twenty workers assigned to each shack. Babies were born "in tents or outside under trees." One infant died shortly after birth. The mother had stood in a crowded flatbed truck all the way from San Antonio, Texas, to Michigan and on her arrival went into labor prematurely.⁶⁰ A single headline from a Michigan paper says it all:

*Want, Poverty, Misery, Terror Ride Through Michigan Sugar
Beet Fields Like Four Horsemen
Mexican Labor Brought Like Cattle to State in
Trucks; Nameless Graves Unmarked in
Fields.*⁶¹

Rural migrant women had few choices other than picking produce. Some became cooks in labor camps and others ran makeshift boardinghouses. In addition to picking produce, caring for her family, and serving as the local midwife, Irene Castañeda's mother took in laundry for which she earned \$5 per week. Working as a housekeeper for local farm and merchant families offered another option, but domestic labor frequently contains the hidden psychological costs of prejudice, discrimination, and humiliation.⁶² Paul Taylor recorded the following observations from Euro-American women in South Texas regarding their Mexican "servants."

They are good domestic servants if you train them right. They are getting better and are clean if you teach them to be. . . . We feel toward the Mexicans like the old southerners toward the Negroes. Some of us have had servants from the same family for three generations.⁶³

In the midst of a family tragedy, Jesusita Torres learned that she definitely preferred migrant work over household employment. At the age of fifteen, Jesusita eloped with a young man she met in the fields and a year later became a mother. At seventeen, Jesusita, pregnant with their second child, had been abandoned by her twenty-four-year-old husband. Moving back in with her mother and relatives, she packed carrots and spinach for a while, but then tried working as a live-in housekeeper. Her mother would care for her toddler son and newborn child. "I went to do housework and they did not pay me too much and I had to stay there so I did not like it." When Jesusita's baby died, her employer helped her provide a proper burial. Señora Torres, however, learned that this assistance was neither an act of charity nor kindness, but an advance she would have to pay back. In her words, "That lady helped me to bury him because I was working for her; so after I got through paying her what I owed her then I quit."⁶⁴ How could this *patróna* be so heartless? Writing about women of color in domestic service, sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn examines both the structural mechanism of a "dual labor system" and the playing out of racialized/gendered identities and ideologies within the employer-employee interpersonal interactions that characterize such work. She theorizes the actions of employers in the following terms: "Racial characterizations effectively neutralized the racial-ethnic woman's womanhood, allowing the mistress to be "unaware" of the domestic's relationship to her own children and household."

Nakano Glenn continues, "The exploitation of racial-ethnic women's physical, emotional, and mental work for the benefit of white households thus could be rendered invisible in consciousness if not in reality."⁶⁵

Migrant women, whether they labored in the fields or someone else's kitchen, conserved scarce familial resources within their own households. They tended subsistence gardens and raised poultry and other barnyard animals. At times, grandparents and children assumed responsibility for the herbs, vegetables, and chickens. Clemente Linares remembers helping his eighty-six-year-old grandfather around the yard. "We raised tomatoes, peas, beans, cabbage, carrots . . . in order to have a root cellar . . . to help provide us through the winter. . . . And of course, we tried to have a hog or two to butcher, maybe a calf, and . . . we had our chickens." Such activities lessened dependence on local merchants and the company store. As Sarah Deutsch has argued, such a mixed economy enabled Hispanos in New Mexico and Colorado a measure of independence.⁶⁶ Yet, once they left the land, they lost that independence. Romero and Margolis explained that when these farmers "left their dry land farms in southern Colorado or northern New Mexico to answer the call of the growers and the sugar beet companies it was a critical step in their transformation from peasant farmers to wage workers." They continue, "By the end of the depression the dignity of wage work had been wrested from them and they had been reduced to underemployed wards of the state."⁶⁷

Whether underemployed, unemployed, or even employed, putting food on the table was a full-time occupation, especially during the Depression. In California fields, migrant farm workers of all ethnicities (Euro-American, African American, Filipino, and Mexican) lived on the brink of starvation. John Steinbeck described a typical diet in good times as "beans, baking powder biscuits, jam, coffee," and, in bad, "dandelion greens and boiled potatoes." Similarly, María Arredondo recalled, "We didn't have enough food. We had beans, very little meat mixed with potatoes and *sopa*."⁶⁸ In her article on the San Joaquin Valley Cotton Strike of 1933, Devra Weber tellingly points to the importance of food in women's daily lives with memories of want indelibly etched in their consciousness. "Men remembered the strike in terms of wages and conditions; women remembered the events in terms of food."⁶⁹

For some, resistance to exploitation took the form of labor activism; for others, escape seemed the only option. A single case study taken from INS records can serve to show fortitude and courage. It concerns over 150 Mexican immigrants recruited to

pick sugar beets by the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company only to find that management failed to abide by the terms of their contracts and the recruited immigrants were left to fend for themselves without coal or food in the bleak Idaho winter. As mentioned earlier, one of the workers, Severiano Rodríguez, had appealed to the Mexican ambassador to intervene on their behalf. In addition, a local priest brought their plight to the county commissioners who authorized the distribution of 1,000 pounds of flour and one ton of coal as well as a relief allotment of \$165 to be divided among sixteen of the neediest families. The county commission then sought compensation from the sugar beet firm. A subsequent Immigration Service investigation absolved the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company from any wrongdoing. Referring to company representatives as "intelligent and capable men," the investigating agent believed that incidences of suffering had been "exaggerated." In a classic example of scapegoating, he chastised Mexicanos for not bringing along the proper clothes and bedding for an Idaho winter and not saving enough of their wages to carry them through to spring. Although he realized that the workers would be charged for such supplies, he seemed bewildered that they turned down company offers of blankets and mattresses. The migrants had already accumulated substantial debt, beginning with company charges for transportation to Idaho, and, though in great want, they were determined to avoid further employer claims to their labor. During the investigation, the Utah-Idaho Sugar Beet Company also made assurances that the Mexican immigrants would henceforth receive adequate supplies of food and fuel. Although the local government had donated some provisions, Mexicans were not welcome as they were perceived as carriers of influenza and even the Immigration Service acknowledged that at least seven migrants had succumbed to the epidemic.⁷⁰

Having little recourse and probably fewer resources, thirty-two people—men, women, and children—gathered their belongings and fled the labor camp. Like the African-American slaves who took a chance on the Underground Railroad, these Mexicano immigrants (twenty-one were members of a single extended family, the Betancourts) made a desperate break for freedom. Behaving like a modern-day planter, the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company appealed to immigration authorities for assistance in apprehending those whom the firm perceived as breaking their contracts with their feet. Labeling them deserters, a company official wrote, "I understand that some of the people are in Pocatello, Idaho, but have reason to believe some of them have gone to Elko, Nevada."⁷¹

Resistance to economic exploitation could also take the form of

ethnic community building. In the citrus belt of southern California, Mexican immigrants established colonias or villages complete with their own organizations and institutions. Forming patriotic associations, mutual aid groups, church societies, and baseball teams, Mexican immigrants created a rich, semiautonomous life for themselves. In historian Gilbert González's words, "The village was home, neighborhood, playground, and social center." The length of the citrus season promoted the development of Orange County colonias and Riverside barrios. With employment available in the groves eight months out of the year, citrus workers had a spatial stability in contrast to transient or contract labor. During the off-season (late summer, early fall), citrus families would often make the migrant circuit north picking grapes and cotton in the San Joaquin Valley or perhaps heading southeast to the rich agricultural fields near Coachella. However, they had a home and community awaiting their return.⁷² For Eusebia Vásquez de Buriel, Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine has been at the center of her life for over sixty years. She recalled how the Mexican neighbors chipped in to build their own church in the middle of the Depression. "We worked real hard to have our church . . . the people were all poor, worst than we are now, but everything came up real nice, so we are very proud of . . . that church." Citrus communities represented a collective identity and a sense of belonging for its members or, as Gilbert González stated, within these villages, workers "constructed their vision of a good society."⁷³

Conditions of migrant life were not confined to agricultural labor. Railroad workers and their families traveled from one boxcar barrio to another. While men went off to the tracks, women endeavored to make the boxcar a home and to nurture ties with their neighbors. When newcomers arrived in Belen, New Mexico, for example, women met the crew trains offering their assistance to the passengers. Frederica Vásquez recalled to her grandson Ray Buriel how "las señoras . . . went out to meet them and brought them food and brought them clothing and made them feel very welcome."⁷⁴

According to historian Jeffrey Garcilazo, "Boxcar communities probably represented the most common form of housing for Mexican workers and their families."⁷⁵ Some were "rolling villages" in that families traveled with their particular shelters while other settlements were composed of boxcars with the wheels removed. The company provided wood-burning stoves and at times outdoor sanitation facilities. However, one Kansas man stated that the out-house only had two seats for thirty people. Given the isolation of many of these settlements, families often had little choice but to

buy their staples from the company commissary. Like the contract laborers employed by the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, track families could become entangled in a web of debt peonage. Noting the high prices charged by the company store, the wife of a Southern Pacific rail worker, Juana Calderón, declared, "We cannot save any money . . . always in debt so we will probably always stay with the . . . Company."⁷⁶

As in the case of farm workers, subsistence gardens and barnyard animals could ease reliance on the company store as well as provide fresh produce, dairy products, and meat. Women and children tended the chickens and goats, pulled weeds, and nurtured seedlings.⁷⁷ One can only imagine their frustration if their husbands were transferred to another section as they gathered their belongings and livestock, leaving the gardens for other families to harvest.

A single boxcar often housed more than one family, generally two, sometimes more. Families sweltered in the Arizona heat and shivered in an Illinois winter. Referring to the railroad settlement of Silvis, Illinois, a *Reader's Digest* article related: "When the Mexicans in their boxcars woke up in the wintertime, children had to break ice in the washbowls before they could clean up for school."⁷⁸ Health care, moreover, was a vital concern. People frequently relied on *curas*, those in the community with knowledge of traditional medicine. Doctors and hospitals were not readily accessible. Frederica Vásquez would lose two daughters in Silvis, one to whooping cough and another to pneumonia.⁷⁹

Railroad wives, like migrant workers, could also find making ends meet a difficult proposition. To supplement their spouses' incomes, they took in sewing, laundry, boarders, even babies. Some women earned money or food for their families by wet-nursing neighborhood infants. As Gregoria Sosa, a railroad worker's wife from Colton, California, recounted:

I bore three children and did washing and ironing for some of my neighbors. Sometimes I was also a wet nurse. I was very sad once when one of my "criados"—a child I breast fed was taken from my breast because his father did not want to pay me any longer. The baby died of hunger not much later. They tried to have him suck on a goat teat. I would have fed him without money, for a little food to help my little ones.⁸⁰

Seeking some measure of economic security, railroad workers in Silvis, Illinois, "saved enough money to buy land that no else

wanted at the west end of town." These men had relatively stable jobs in the repair shop of the Rock Island Railroad.⁸¹ After years of migrating on the Rock Island rails, Felix Vásquez would also secure employment as a bolt maker at the Silvis plant and for ten years he and his family would call Silvis home. Recalling the close-knit nature of the community, his daughter Eusebia stated, "Most people were real nice, they called [each other] los compadres." She further explained that during the influenza epidemic of 1918, her father organized a food drive to assist his afflicted neighbors. "My father used to have a little wagon and every week, he used to go to every house and pick up food . . . to help the sick people."⁸²

Mutual aid proved a cornerstone in the process of settlement among Mexican workers in the United States. It should be noted that not everyone participated in this sense of reciprocity, as evident in Gregoria Sosa's narrative. However, like the frontier women described by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca in *We Fed Them Cactus*,⁸³ Mexicanas, whether in migrant camps, boxcar barrios, or mining towns, sought to exercise some control over their lives, often relying on one another for material and emotional support.

The cultural construction of class can be discerned in the mining communities of southern Arizona and southern Colorado. Both locales had a mixed economy—mining towns next to villages with ranches and homesteads marking the landscape. In *Songs My Mother Sang to Me*, Patricia Preciado Martin presents the oral narratives of ten Arizona women, women whose memories elucidate the division of labor within families as well as the layering of generations within a regional matrix. Furthermore, Martin's narrators demonstrate how women claimed a public space through expressions of religious faith.⁸⁴

Typical of working-class Mexican and Mexican-American households, the family served as the locus of production. Whether from a ranching or mining family, daughters were expected to perform a round of arduous chores. The labor of female kin, regardless of age, proved instrumental in ensuring the family's economic survival. Women preserved food for the winter, sold surplus commodities to neighbors, did laundry for Euro-American employers, and provided homes for lodgers. Like their pioneer foremothers, they also herded livestock, milked cows, built fences, and harvested crops. A strict division of labor according to gender became blurred. Yet this seemingly egalitarian assignment of tasks in no way subverted the traditional notion of "woman's place." Before the break of dawn, Rosalía Salazar and her sisters would rise to

gather kindling, milk the cows, and afterwards walk several miles to school, a routine that began with serving their father a cup of coffee.⁸⁵

With fortitude, faith, and unsung courage, single mothers relied on their domestic skills to feed their children. Julia Yslas Vélez recalled how her mother, who came from a middle-class background in Mexico, peddled her handmade garments to "poor" Mexicans. "She did not have a formal education, but she was very smart. She had a little book. . . . She used to mark in it what people owed her. She would draw a circle for a dollar and a half circle for fifty cents."⁸⁶ Across Arizona and the Southwest, women participated in the informal economy in various ways—lodging single miners in Superior, Arizona, selling pan dulce door to door in San Bernardino, or swapping sex for food in El Paso. Some relied on their healing skills. As *curanderas* (healers) and *pateras* (midwives), Mexican women nurtured the networks essential for claiming a place in the United States.

A layering of generations and peoples characterized rural Arizona. Mexicano migrants from Sonora homesteaded alongside Mexican Americans. Marriages occurred across generational and racial lines. Boardinghouses brought people together. At Josepha's Boarding House in Superior, for instance, a young Sonoran miner successfully courted Josefa's Arizona-born daughter. The oral histories in *Songs My Mother Sang to Me* reveal a multiracial agrarian society. As an example, Rosalía Salazar was the child of a Mexican mother and a "full-blooded Opata Indian" father. She married Wilford Whelan, whose mother Ignacia was Mexicana.⁸⁷ In the center of this multiracial society was a distinctive Mexican-American agrarian culture, one that incorporated those willing to partake of it. Some "Americanos" attended fiestas, dances, and religious pageants. Assimilation was not a one-way street. In southern Arizona, assimilation seemed to be thrown in reverse. Inter-marriage did not guarantee the anglicization of the region's Spanish-speaking peoples. "Many of the offspring of Mexican-Anglo unions emphasized their Mexican rather than their Anglo heritage," observed historian Thomas Sheridan. "The reasons they did so testify to the enduring strength of Mexican society in the face of Anglo political and economic hegemony."⁸⁸ One also has to take into account the class bridge, with Mexican-Euro-American intermarriage occurring among those who owned property. The voices represented in *Songs* point to an expansive Mexican cultural horizon in southern Arizona where one's "positionality" or identity rested not in some

essentialist biological mooring but through acceptance and adoption of Mexican cultural values and expectations.

Yet southern Arizona was a stratified society complete with segregated schools and clearly demarcated "American" and "Mexican" sides of mining towns. "I'll admit there was a lot of discrimination in those years," declared Carlotta Silvas Martin as she recalled growing up as a miner's daughter. In Mascot, Dolores Montoya opened a boardinghouse in the Euro-American section of the town. Decades later, her daughter Esperanza would vividly recount the fear she felt as she, her recently widowed mother, and her siblings were forced to abandon the family-run boardinghouse in the face of systematic terror and harassment. In the dark of night, someone kept turning the doorknob and separating the vines from the window. Reaching a point of desperation, the family fled with only their clothing "After we left, whoever it was did a good job of robbing us. They took everything—dishes, jewelry, furniture—anything of value, even the *santos*."⁸⁹

Women relied on one another and on their faith. Religious practices permeated everyday routines. In preparing the masa for the tortillas, María del Carmen Trejo de Gastelum "would always add salt to the flour in the form of *la Santa Cruz* (the Holy Cross)—*para bendecir la masa* (to bless the dough)." With regard to education, the convent of the Sisters of the Company of Mary in Douglas, Arizona, served as a bulwark against the Americanizing influences of a mining town. The nuns became teachers of both catechism and custom.⁹⁰ Church *jamaicas*, saints' days, and Mexican patriotic holidays constituted an integral part of Arizona's Mexican-American agrarian culture. Recalling the celebration of "Las Posadas," Carlotta Silvas Martin observed:

Las Posadas are a reenactment of the travels of Joseph and Mary who are looking for shelter before the birth of Jesus. Large groups of men, women, and children walked in procession thorough the darkened streets carrying candles. . . . We'd arrive at a designated house and sing songs asking for *posada* or lodging . . . those inside would answer that there was no room. We'd go to several houses until we arrived at a chosen house. . . . Then we'd go in and have food—chocolate and *pan de huevo* . . . and a piñata full of candy.⁹¹

Las Posadas reaffirmed the practice of ritualized visiting among kin and friends; it seemed as much a celebration of community networks as a religious journey. From a small home altar nestled atop

a bureau dresser to a well-orchestrated town play or pageant, Mexicans in southern Arizona viewed their own interpretations of Catholicism as integral parts of their cultural life. Women also carved out a public cultural space in these community-based religious productions.

Women's daily lives appear to corroborate Richard White's observation on the cultural construction of class. "A self-conscious working class demands not just common labor, but also a common sense of identity, a common set of interests, and a common set of values." Arguing that "ethnic solidarity often seemed more important than working class solidarity," White maintained that Western mining towns "often seemed a collection of separate ethnic working-class communities whose overarching class consciousness was tentative and fragile when it existed at all."⁹²

While racial/cultural boundaries could blur in Arizona's agrarian communities, in southern Colorado, ethnic boundaries appear relatively fixed, with racial/class divisions cropping up even within groups of Spanish-speaking workers. Born in Walsenberg, Colorado, in 1921, Erminia Ruiz was considered the daughter of a "mixed marriage"—her father was a Mexican immigrant, her mother a Hispana born in nearby Trinidad. She remembered that Mexican union families (those associated with the Industrial Workers of the World) tended to stick together. On Saturday night, they would gather at someone's house for music, food, dancing, and fellowship. "All the neighbors got together. You'd have dancing and they put all the chairs out . . . and the ladies would bake pies and cakes." During the Columbine Strike of 1927, Erminia had little contact with her mother's side of the family as her uncles were scabs. "We were in a way closer to our neighbors." She also remembered attending union meetings with her father, sitting on his knee and listening to all the languages spoken around her. There, she learned to sing her first song in English—"Solidarity Forever." Her personal story correlates well with Sarah Deutsch's analysis of the ways in which ethnic and regional identities in New Mexico and Colorado reconfigure class consciousness within separate communities.⁹³

Whether they lived in a camp, village, or city, Mexican women carved a place for themselves and their families based on shared experiences, cultural traditions, histories, and concerns. They relied on one another as family members and as neighbors whether they lived in a tightly knit rural colonia or a rolling boxcar barrio. Yet, as we have seen, patriarchy and even class distinctions existed; fami-

lies could be source of strength or a source of trial. But the range of their lives and their struggles seemed lost on the American public. Growing nativist sentiment during the 1920s and 1930s began to blame Mexican immigrants for society's ills.

A Mexican "expert" from Vanderbilt University, Dr. Roy Garis testified before a U.S. congressional committee. He reiterated the views of a Euro-American Westerner, a man who claimed that Mexican women were instinctively prone to adultery. Relaying this questionable third-party testimony, Garis recapitulated the tired, trite, and grotesque nineteenth-century gendered, racialized stereotypes for a modern audience.⁹⁴ A portion follows:

Their minds run to nothing higher than animal functions—eat, sleep, and sexual debauchery. In every huddle of Mexican shacks one meets the same idleness . . . filthy children with faces plastered with flies, diseases, lice . . . apathetic peons and lazy squaws.⁹⁵

These sentiments were not isolated, extremist meanderings. With a circulation of nearly three million, *The Saturday Evening Post* ran a series of articles urging the restriction of Mexican immigration. The titles tell the story: "The Mexican Invasion," "Wet and Other Mexicans," and "The Alien on Relief." One article, "The Docile Mexican," characterized Mexicano immigrants with the following adjectives: "illiterate, diseased, pauperized." Relying on mixed metaphors as well as the opinions of scientists who dabbled in eugenics, the author Kenneth Roberts refers to Mexicans as both "white elephants" and as people who bring "countless numbers of American citizens into the world with the reckless prodigality of rabbits." Roberts cautions against "the mongrelization of America," warning further that the children of Mexican and Euro-American parents will result in "another mixed race problem; and as soon as a race is mixed, it is inferior."⁹⁶ And under the heading of "The Mexican Conquest," the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* offered his opinion in the June 22, 1929 issue:

The very high Mexican birth rate tends to depress still further the low white birth rate. Thus a race problem of the greatest magnitude is being allowed to develop for future generations to regret and in spite of the fact that the Mexican Indian is considered a most undesirable ethnic stock for the melting pot.⁹⁷

With the onset of the Great Depression, rhetoric exploded into action. Between 1931 to 1934, an estimated one-third of the Mexican population in the United States (over 500,000 people) were either deported or repatriated to Mexico even though the majority were native U.S. citizens. Mexicans were the only immigrants targeted for removal. Proximity to the Mexican border, the physical distinctiveness of mestizos, and easily identifiable barrios influenced immigration and social welfare officials to focus their efforts solely on the Mexican people, people whom they viewed as both foreign usurpers of American jobs and as unworthy burdens on relief rolls. From Los Angeles, California, to Gary, Indiana, Mexicans were either summarily deported by immigration agencies or persuaded to depart voluntarily by duplicitous social workers who greatly exaggerated the opportunities awaiting them south of the border.⁹⁸ In the words of George Sánchez,

As many as seventy-five thousand Mexicans from southern California returned to Mexico by 1932. . . . The enormity of these figures, given the fact that California's Mexican population was in 1930 slightly over three hundred and sixty thousand . . . indicates that almost every Mexican family in southern California confronted in one way or another the decision of returning or staying.⁹⁹

Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez place the deportation and repatriation figures even higher. Drawing on statistics from both U.S. and Mexican government agencies as well as newspaper reports, they contend that one million Mexicanos were repatriated or deported during the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, they note "that approximately 60 percent . . . were children who had been born in the United States."¹⁰⁰

The methods of departure varied. A historian of Los Angeles, Douglas Monroy, recounts how *la migra* trolled the barrio in a "dog catcher's wagon." In one instance, immigration agents tore a Los Angeles woman from her home in the early morning hours, threw her in the wagon, and then left her toddler screaming on the front porch.¹⁰¹ Even if such scenes were few and far between, they certainly invoked fear among Mexicanos, many of whom decided to take the county up on its offer of free train fare. Carey McWilliams described those boarding a repatriation train as "men, women, and children—with dogs, cats, and goats . . . [with] half-open suitcases,

rolls of bedding, and lunch baskets."¹⁰² Thousands more chose to leave by automobile. They piled all their possessions—mattresses, furniture, clothing—into a jalopy and headed south. This scene of auto caravans making their way into the interior of Mexico offers a curious parallel to the ensuing Dust Bowl or "Okie" migration into California.¹⁰³

Losing one child and struggling to support the other, Jesusita Torres held on to her place in the United States. She refused to apply for relief because she and her mother wanted to escape the notice of government authorities. "My mother said it was no use for us to [go] back . . . to what? We did not have anything out there." Describing the repatriation of two friends, she further remarked, "We were sorry that they left, because both of the ladies the husbands left them [in Mexico] with their children. It was pretty hard for them." Jesusita survived the Depression by picking berries and string beans around Los Angeles and following the crops in the San Joaquin Valley. From her wages, she raised a family and bought a house, one she purchased for seventeen dollars.¹⁰⁴

Petra Sánchez had no choice. By the fall of 1933, Petra and Ramón appear to have built a nice life for themselves in Buena Park. With the money from berry picking and manure hauling combined with Petra's frugal budgeting, the couple had leased a small ranch. From 1926 to 1933, their family grew from four children to ten.¹⁰⁵ According to Marjorie Sánchez-Walker,

Even with a new baby arriving every fifteen months, Petra still found the time to supplement the family's needs from her industry. Chicken provided eggs and meat that she could sell when there was a surplus; her garden produced vegetables; she made cheeses which hung . . . over the dining room table; and in the summer, she picked berries for wages.¹⁰⁶

Petra found she could not keep up this pace. In November 1933, she suffered a nervous breakdown and was committed to the Norwalk State Mental Hospital.¹⁰⁷

By Christmas, Petra, her health seemingly restored, would be home with her family again, but home now was her childhood village of San Julián. Coming under the scrutiny of relief authorities, Ramón believed that if the family left voluntarily, they could return at a later date. However, his papers bore the stamp: "LOS ANGELES COUNTY/DEPARTMENT OF CHARITIES/COUNTY WELFARE DEPARTMENT." The family now bore the onus of "liable to become a public charge"

and thus "ineligible for readmission." "Repatriation, therefore, amounted to deportation for Petra and Ramón."¹⁰⁸

In 1935, hoping to return to California, the couple and their eleven children, with another on the way, traveled to Ciudad Juárez. They were turned away at the border. With money running low, Ramón "shaved his moustache, borrowed money for a second-hand suit and with his green eyes and fair-skin, simply walked across the border." He planned to earn enough money picking berries in Buena Park to secure his family's clandestine passage to the United States. The children supported the family—the boys by shining shoes, selling trinkets, and "lagging pennies"; and the girls by running errands for neighbors. Six-year-old Juan acted as a "tour guide" for U.S. army personnel on the prowl for a good time in the Red Light District and for his labor received tips from both soldiers and prostitutes.¹⁰⁹

The deprivation in Ciudad Juárez was well known. The *New York Times* carried a story of how over twenty repatriates had died "from pneumonia and exposure." Without resources or shelter, "as many as 2,000 lived in a large open corral."¹¹⁰ With hunger a constant companion, Petra gave birth to a daughter Catalina, but the infant would die in Juárez fifteen months later, her coffin handmade by her brother Librado. Petra held her children together under the most adverse circumstances. In 1937, the family was reunited in California; but Ramón and Petra would never regain the level of financial security they had known living on their leased Buena Park ranch.¹¹¹

After 1934, the deportation and repatriation campaigns diminished, but the effects of the Depression, segregation, and economic segmentation remained. Even members of the middle-class Mexican-American community were not immune. During the 1930s and 1940s, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) led the fight for school desegregation in the courts. At the household level, maintaining appearances proved important. With no money for coal, Eduardo Araiza, who owned a small auto repair shop in El Paso, brought home rubber tires to burn in the fireplace. As his daughter Alma related, "You kept up appearances even though your stomach grumbled."¹¹²

The border journeys of Mexican women were fraught with unforeseen difficulties, but held out the promises of a better life. In the words of one Mexicana, "Here woman has come to have a place like a human being."¹¹³ Women built communities of resiliency, drawing strength from their comadres, their families, and their

faith. Confronting "America" often mean confronting the labor contractor, the boss, the landlord, or *la migra*. It could also involve negotiating the settlement house, the grammar school, and the health clinic. State and church-sponsored Americanization projects could portend cultural hegemony, individual empowerment, vocational tracking, community service, or all four simultaneously. To get at how Mexicanas and their children traversed the terrain of Americanization in negotiating institutions and ideologies, a case study seems appropriate. The Rose Gregory Houchen Settlement House in El Paso, Texas, emphasized "Christian Americanization" while furnishing social services denied Mexicans in the public sector. A historical survey of this Methodist settlement reveals much about how women, especially as mothers and daughters, claimed portions of Americanization within their own cultural frames.

2

Confronting "America"



As a child Elsa Chávez confronted a "moral" dilemma. She wanted desperately to enjoy the playground equipment close to her home in El Paso's Segundo Barrio. The tempting slide, swings, and jungle gym seemed to call her name. However, her mother would not take her near the best playground (and for many years the only playground) in the barrio. Even a local priest warned Elsa and her friends that playing there was a sin—the playground was located within the yard of the Rose Gregory Houchen Settlement, a Methodist community center.¹

While one group of Americans responded to Mexican immigration by calling for restriction and deportation, other groups mounted campaigns to "Americanize" the immigrants. From Los Angeles, California, to Gary, Indiana, state and religious-sponsored Americanization programs swung into action. Imbued with the ideology of "the melting pot," teachers, social workers, and religious missionaries envisioned themselves as harbingers of salvation and civilization.² Targeting women and especially children, the vanguard of Americanization placed their trust "in the rising generation." As Pearl Ellis of the Covina City schools explained in a 1929 publication, *Americanization Through Homemaking*, "Since the girls are potential mothers and homemakers, they will control in a large measure, the destinies of their future families." She continued, "It is she who sounds the clarion call in the campaign for better homes."³