The History Of Mexican Immigration Essay, Research Paper

The History of Mexican Immigration to the United States.

Over the passed one and a half centuries, since the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848 gave the United States most lands north of

the Rio Grande, the 1200 mile United States-Mexican border has been a very active one. Mexicans have emigrated from

their homeland in droves over these years in three major phases preceded by a small phase. The Mexicans have made this

exodus in search of a better life than their homeland could offer.

At first Mexicans had no interest in settling in the United States. This sentiment changed when the border had been

closed. Mexicans feared never being able to come back to where jobs are much more plentiful than in their homeland.

Others were content with the American way and decided to try to become citizens. These people who stayed gathered in the

Southwest and major cities like Chicago and Detroit and created thriving communities in America much like that of

earlier European immigrants of the past to America.

Mexicans first came to America in small numbers with the Sonoran miners and later came in huge numbers at different

points in time. They all came for the same reasons, jobs.

Migration of Sonoran Miners

During the years of 1848 to 1956 miners from the state of Sonora Mexico emigrated to the southern mines of California.

The California Gold Rush was in full bloom and the Sonorans wanted a piece of the action. This marked the first exodus,

yet minor, of Mexicans to the United States. As many as 500 Mexicans a day passed through the Santa Ines Mission in

Northern Sonora. People were so set on leaving and joining in on the gold rush they braved the severe winter of 1848.

Mexican officials started to worry because of the depopulation of Sonora. The Mexican Press waged a campaign to stop the

exodus. A reversal of sorts occurred in 1849 when some of those who emigrated returned to their homelands. Upon their

arrival they found conditions in Sonora worse than when they left.

Sonoran miners were renowned for their abilities to produce despite the harsh conditions in the California mines.

“Sonorans found the best pay dirt, recognized the gold first, and dug up the biggest nuggets” (Standart 6).

In 1850 the Foreign Miners Tax law was passed. The law levied a $20 a month tax on foreign miners. Foreigners as well

as American miners were against the bill but protested to no avail. This led to 500 Sonorans leaving their work for

their homeland or to other areas to mine.

The migration effectively stopped in 1851. By 1856 the migration was over. Some Sonorans went back to Mexico, while

others settled in Los Angeles and other big cities. After the migration of Sonoran miners, there was little to no

immigration to the United States by Mexicans for about 20 years.

The First Phase of Mexican Immigration To the United States- The First Laborers

The first phase of Mexican immigration lasted from the late 1800’s to the early 1900’s. “Between 1877 and 1910, it is

estimated that the population of Mexico increased by six million. Mexican haceinda size increased on average from

12,000 to 20,000 acres, some as large as 250,000 acres” (Miller 28). This led to less and less land for rural farmers

who owned 7.7 percent of the total Mexican land, but made the vast majority of the population. In 1910 it was estimated

that a Mexican farm workers purchasing power was one fourteenth that of an American Farm worker of the same class.

The use of Mexicans on American farms began in the late 1880’s when the sugar beet industry was introduced to

California. “Mexicans were used because, American laborers refused to accept such backbreaking work” (Miller 28).

The Dingley Tariff Act of 1897 stimulated immigration to the United States. This act allowed the sugar beet industry to

become very profitable through the use of inexpensive Mexican labor.

Mexican immigration to the U.S. was also stimulated by the Mexican revolution of 1909-1910. People trying to flee

persecution fled to the United States, along with people trying to escape the blood shed and major change.

In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s Japanese and Chinese immigration to the United States was thwarted by new foreign

policy imposed on the two nations. The two groups made up most of the railway work force. Mexicans were used to

supplement their departure from this business. At this stage Mexicans made up most of the railway work force in the

southwest. Between 35,000 and 50,000 Mexicans were employed by the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe lines.

Mexicans were usually referred to as peons . They were thought to be lazy, docile, and lacking ambition. “The Mexican,”

reported economist Victor S. Clark in 1908, “is docile, patient, usually orderly in camp, fairly intelligent under

competent supervision, obedient and cheap. If he was active and ambitious, he would be less tractable and would cost

more. His strongest point is his willingness to work for a low wage” (Reisler 25).

There was a small number of Americans who thought otherwise. Protestant missionaries trying to convert Mexicans said

Americans could learn from Mexicans. “They emphasized the Mexican artistic and musical ability and his love of beauty”

(Reisler 27-28).

In 1930 Congress passed a quota bill curtailing the number of Mexican immigrants allowed to enter the United States.

This ended the first phase of Mexican immigration. “Perhaps as much as ten percent of Mexico’s population

approximately one and a half million people [immigrated] to the U.S. between 1900 and 1930″ (Reisler 23).

Between the first and second phase of Mexican immigration 350,000 to 500,000 Mexicans went to back to their native

lands during the great depression.

The Second Phase of Mexican Immigration to The United States- The Bracero Program

The second phase of Mexican immigration came around the end of World War II with the Mexico Contract laborers, better

known as the Bracero Program. This came about with the shortage of agricultural workers in the United States, and poor

economic conditions in Mexico. “It was devised so that Mexicans could be sent to work in selected agricultural areas of

the United States under a series of bilateral agreements between the two countries” (Miller 29).

Each Mexican state was given a quota for the number of those to be contracted from their state. Workers were then

brought to recruitment centers. The Mexicans who were accepted at these centers were turned over to the U.S.

Department of Labor, who placed the workers in U.S. farms.

The number of contracts issued was far less than that of Mexicans wanting to come over. “For example, in 1945 the

number of permits given by the Mexican government totaled 104,541 but only 49,454 contracts were issued by the U.S.

Department of Labor” (Miller 30).

After World War II the U.S. demand for Mexican immigrants increased. “Of a total of 4.6 million contracts issued during

the life of the program around 72 percent were printed between 1955 and 1964″ (Miller 30).

Two related controversies created opposition to the program. In 1948 the United States opened its border to several

thousand Mexicans because of a labor shortage. “The Mexican government was upset over this and considered taking

action for damages inflected along its Northern border due to an uncontrollable exodus of border resident laborers”

(Miller 30). The United States apologized and the two sides were at peace.

On January 15, 1954, the United States said all Braceros were to be contracted until the U.S. and Mexican governments

came to a new agreement on the program. Mexico responded by not letting laborers be contracted legally by the United

States. Large groups of Mexicans did not take the demands seriously and gathered at border cities, wanting to enter the

United States. The Mexicans brought troops to the cities trying to disband the crowds. When Mexican President Ruiz

Cortinez heard the event was leading to domestic crises he withdrew his troops. The United States and Mexico came to

agreement with no harm done.

Between 1949 and 1959 the number of Bracero’s increased from 8,500 to 84,000. During the later stage of this

increase opposition to the program also greatly increased. Farm workers union’s greatly opposed the program and

demanded its termination. In 1960 opposition rose in Congress. The Kennedy Administration openly opposed the program.

The program was ended in 1964. Mexico made last ditch efforts to restore the program, but in 1975 the Mexican

government finally realized the Bracero program was not its answer to its unemployment problems.

The Third Phase of Mexican Immigration to the United States- Illegal Immigration

The last stage of Mexican immigration starts right after the Bracero program. This stage is most notable for the mind

boggling number of illegal Mexicans who cross the United States-Mexican border. “The most heavily traveled border in

the world is a strip of scrubby California desert [la frontera] that runs 15 miles between the United States and

Mexico, starting at the Pacific Ocean and ending at a thriving yet isolated spot called Otay Mesa” (Barich 50). The only

place along this strip representing a city is the infamous Tijuana. Every year 43 million people pass through its legal

port of entry.

Most illegal immigrants are men in their late teens to early 20’s, although in the past few years it has become common

to spot whole families making the trip. Some make the trip many times in their lives, going back and forth. They make a

little money and take this money back to their homeland. These men are known as Nortenos (Northerners). They are

somewhat feared, and somewhat honored upon returning to their villages from the states.

Illegal aliens come up with many different ways to enter the United States. “On a hot summer day they like to put on

bathing suits . . . and swim to shore. They wade through raw sewage in the Tijuana River. They jam themselves into car

trunks and into boxcars, and they ride across the border spread-eagled on the top of freight trains. The boldest ones

merely sprint through the backed-up traffic at the port of entry, defying the Border Patrol to chase them” (Barich 52).

Approximately five thousand illegals pass through la frontera every 24 hours. “The San Diego Border Patrol captures

around 1,500 people every day, 470,000 illegals were captured by the San Diego Border Patrol in 1990″ (Barich 52).

Those who are caught are sent back to Mexico and most likely will make another attempt at the border in the future.

Those who get by the border patrol will go on and try to find work or their families who have already crossed the border.

Others will go to Oregon and Washington to pick apples or work close to sea if work is not plentiful or available in

California.

Another way of getting across the border is through the coyote system. A person will usually pay between three and

seven hundred dollars to a coyote who will guide them across the border. This guide is part entrepreneur, part

extortionist. The coyote will leave the immigrants if pressed by the Border Patrol. The coyote is also known for keeping

unsuspecting illegal immigrants hostage, and only letting them go if their family comes up with ransom. The coyote

business thrives at the border and makes life that much worse there.

Also sometimes used to cross the border is the help of an experienced illegal. This person has crossed the border many

times and agrees to let another illegal tag along on his next journey across the border for a small fee. This type of

person is hard to come by for most. Typically to find such a person you must know someone who knows someone else who

is trustworthy enough to lead the way. Others do not like tag alongs because they might slow them down or get them

caught by the border patrol.

Since 1960 more people have illegally and legally immigrated to United States from Mexico than from any other country

in the world. “In 1900 there were 103,000 Mexicans in the United States. In 1960 there were 2.3 million. In 1990

there were 13.4 million. It is projected that in 2010 there will be 40 million Americans of Latino descent (majority

Mexican) in the United States.” (Gutierrez, Intro XV).

Because of this mass immigration, some people in United States have openly opposed continued Mexican immigration.

Policies such as Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 will drastically cut the number of immigrants to the United

States. I believe these policies are blatantly racist. For years American industry has wanted and openly supported the

use of Mexican labor, including illegal labor. I have never heard an opponent of Mexican immigration mention the poor

working conditions or illegal activity of industry over these years. This is typical of racism to pick at the places where

a person can not fight and not go after the real problem.

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