

The Mexican Women of El Paso during the Great Depression

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Introduction

In times of economic difficulty society tends to become less tolerant of immigrants and minorities; such was the case in several parts of the United States during the years of the Great Depression. El Paso, Texas was no exception and tension among the population emerged as the town felt the growing economic pressure. The tension created a rise in anti-Mexican sentiment in the border town despite the presence of a large Mexican¹ population. According to historian Oscar J. Martinez, in 1930 Mexicans constituted almost sixty-seven percent of El Paso's population.² The anti-Mexican sentiment made times tougher for Mexicans living in the city as they experienced more discrimination in the workforce and in other sectors.

At first El Paso seemed to be evading the economic crisis that was taking hold of the nation. In 1931, the first major signs of an economic depression were making themselves known in the city of El Paso. People began to lose jobs while others kept seeing their wages consistently go down. Also just as people had feared the local First National Bank closed down thus sending people into a frenzy. Other significant businesses failed across town and tension then gripped the city of El Paso.³

As was the case in several parts of the country the Mexican immigrant was blamed for the economic hardships of the town. The experiences of the Mexican community living in the United States during the Great Depression has been studied by various historians. The experiences of Mexican women in particular though, has not been written about in depth. This paper attempts to capture the experiences of the Mexican women of El Paso during the 1930's.

The experiences of Mexican women in El Paso during the Great Depression are characterized by increased discrimination in various sectors based on their race, class, and

¹ The term "Mexican" as it is used in this paper refers to any person of Mexican descent.

² Oscar J. Martínez, *The Chicanos of El Paso: An Assessment of Progress* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1980,) 8.

³ C. L. Sonnichsen, *Pass of the North* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1980), 31-34.

gender. To prove this, the paper will cover three main sections. The first section will concentrate on the tension that existed in the city by analyzing the move to reduce the international bridge's hours of operation. Secondly, there will be a focus on the experiences of Mexican women in the labor force. Lastly, the paper will examine the experience of women with the government and charitable organizations.

Tension on the Border

The tension that arose in the border town is best reflected in the attempt to minimize the international bridge's hours of operation. The growing anti-Mexican sentiment in part fueled a move to reduce the hours of operation in 1931 in an effort to reduce the commuting between the border towns. The new suggested hours were a later ten o'clock opening and an earlier closing of six o'clock.⁴ People gave different reasons for their support or opposition to the new hours of operation. The reasons always centered on the role that Mexicans played in the city of El Paso. Mexicans in El Paso were seen as contributing to the economic hardships of the town by taking jobs and relief from U.S. citizens.

Among the major supporters of the bridge plan was the El Paso Central Labor Union. They, like other groups, believed that Mexicans unfairly competed for jobs in El Paso. Many Mexican nationals crossed the bridge daily to come to work in El Paso. W. J. Moran, editor of the *Labor Advocate*, wanted to stress that the adjustment was "not a fight on alien labor. It is simply to give resident of El Paso preference in employment. It makes no difference whether a resident is a citizen or non-citizen, he is entitled to work and should have preference

⁴ "Six o'Clock Closing is Favored," *El Paso Times*, 28 August 1931, 1.

over laborers living elsewhere.”⁵ The adjustment of the hours was seen as a means to ensure more jobs for El Pasoans and stop Juarez residents from taking jobs in El Paso.

The bridge closure was also supported on the basis that it would discourage Americans from spending American money in Mexico. Public officials wanted people to spend their money in the United States to help local businesses and merchants.⁶ The gambling halls in Ciudad Juarez were a major concern as they were seen as a threat not only to the economy but the family too. They hoped that the shorter bridge hours would “halt once and forever the drain of money from El Paso into the coffers of Mexican gambling halls.”⁷ Business men were deeply concerned about money being spent in Juarez that they moved to discourage people from doing so. An article in the *El Paso Times* stated that El Paso business men hired observers to check which El Pasoans were visiting the Tivoli, the major gambling hall in Juarez. Individuals who worked in El Paso and owed El Paso businesses money were watched closely. The business men threatened that the use of the gambling halls by these men could “have an effect upon their credit or their employment.”⁸

The draining of American dollars into businesses in Mexico was a major issue. Many people living in El Paso regularly crossed to Ciudad Juarez to shop for groceries to save some money. Some food items cost less in Juarez and people always tried to stretch their money as much as they could. This sometimes raised resentment which led to harassment for individuals crossing back to El Paso. The local Mexican newspaper, *El Continental*, described one incident where border inspectors took away several women’s passports for bringing items purchased in Juarez. The women begged the officials that they return their passports. A bit later a man who

⁵ “Ask Bridge Kept Closed to 10 a.m.,” *El Paso Times*, 9 July 1931, 1-2.

⁶ “Bridge Fight to Continue,” *El Paso Times*, 24 September 1931, 1.

⁷ “CC Members Vote to Close Up Bridge,” *El Paso Times*, 22 August 1931, 4.

⁸ “El Paso is For Early Bridge,” *El Paso Times* 22 August 1931, 4.

seemed to be in charge ordered that the passports be returned. At this point the officials threw the passports on the ground for the women to pick up.⁹

Other El Pasoans did not see a need to alter the bridge's hours. An argument against the shorter hours was based on economic concerns. Many feared that the move would hurt economic relations with neighboring Mexico. There was a possibility that resentment by Mexico would lead to a business boycott on American goods. The *Times* reported that Juarez union men threatened a trade ban if the bridge closing was successful.¹⁰

Others felt the bridge change would not bring an end to the alien labor problem. According to another article submitted to the *Times*, the root of the problem laid in the American employers since it was the employers who were paying the wages of the Juarez workers. Closing the bridge would not stop workers from coming to work in El Paso. Instead, the article called for approaching employers to discourage them from using Juarez labor. The employers should be made to understand the "injustice they are doing to their own fellow citizens" and then work to "built up a strong sentiment for employing our own people."¹¹ The article also emphasized hiring American citizens ahead of not only foreigners but also residents. Residents are any individuals who are legally living in the United States but were born outside the U.S. and are not naturalized American citizens. The majority of the residents present in El Paso were Mexican. Therefore, the article was advocating that employers not hire Mexicans at all even though they legally settled and could work in the U.S.

Mexicans in El Paso faced discrimination based solely on their race regardless of their legal status. Reflecting on the sentiment towards Mexicans during the Depression, civic leader Cleofas Calleros stated:

⁹ "Queja Contra los Inspectores del Puente Santa Fe," *El Continental* 2 August 1933, 1.

¹⁰ "Ask Bridge Kept Closed to 10 am," *El Paso Times*, 9 July 1931, 1.

¹¹ "Solve It Through the Employers," *El Paso Times*, 10 July 1931, 4.

It was up to employers to get rid of the Mexican, to fire them, and it was up to the employer not to hire any more Mexicans. A depression, when it comes in a country, the ones who suffer are supposed to be the aliens. And very few Americans knew the difference between being a citizen and being a Mexican national. They look at them and say, 'Oh you are a Mexican.'¹²

Cleofas Calleros brings up an important and common point. The issue at times was not a matter of legal or illegal status but a matter of race. Mexicans could be discriminated against in the workforce solely for being of Mexican descent. In 1931, men planned a demonstration at the employment bureau to protest the hiring of Mexican workers to complete a local project. The project which would employ 1510 men involved constructing over two miles of road in McKelligon Canyon.¹³ Men were outraged at the rumor that Mexican men had been hired. The atmosphere was so heated that the police were prepared to face the mob by being armed with tear gas bombs. J. R. Martin, the manager of the U.S. employment bureau, tried to ease the men's concerns by stating "all men employed in the work are Americans. Not even an American-born Mexican has been employed in the work".¹⁴ Employers and government agencies often did not care to distinguish the legal status of people of Mexican descent. Therefore the ones who would suffer were not only aliens but Mexican residents and citizens alike.

The growing economic pressures and racial fears forced many Mexicans out of the U.S. California and Texas had the highest number of repatriates in the nation. In September of 1931, the *El Paso Times* featured an article which estimated that as many as 15,000 Mexicans had left the city within the last ten or eleven months.¹⁵ The fear of deportation and pressure to leave was very real in the border city. Another newspaper described that "the panic that has taken hold of the majority of Mexicans living here forces them to sell or otherwise dispose of what little they

¹² Cleofas Calleros, interviewed by Oscar J. Martinez, 14 September 1972.

¹³ "1510 Men Get Canyon Jobs," *El Paso Times*, 20 January 1932, 10.

¹⁴ "Police to Halt Mob Violence," *El Paso Times*, 25 September 1931, 1.

¹⁵ "Says 1500 Mexicans Have Left El Paso." *El Paso Times*, 25 September 1931, 1.

posses...Commercial establishments of all kinds already feel the lack of Mexican customers, and it is known that many clothing stores are about to go bankrupt.”¹⁶ While some groups were busy advocating to get rid of the Mexican population they were also leading local businesses to fail. The Mexican population was important to the local economy and the departures were only worsening the economic situation.

The intolerance Mexicans experienced all over the United States was reflected in the border town of El Paso despite having a large Mexican population. The Mexican population certainly saw their situation in the El Paso become increasingly more difficult. The Mexican women in El Paso had particular problems to face within this time.

Mexican American Women and Labor

It has been described how the tension in El Paso during the 1930’s created an anti-Mexican sentiment that also targeted Mexican Americans. It is important to look at how the sentiments of the town affected Mexican women, particularly in the labor force. Their experiences are interesting because of the connotations brought on by being a woman and a Mexican. Mexican American women had been in the labor force for years, but during the Great Depression, they faced discrimination on the basis of race, class and gender. At times the women joined together to demand better wages.

In the 1930’s Mexican American women compromised an important part of the workforce. The state of Texas contained the highest number of employed Mexican women in the nation.¹⁷ In his case study of Mexican women in El Paso, Mario T. Garcia states that El Paso

¹⁶ Quoted in Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez Since 1848* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 89.

¹⁷ Yolanda Chávez Leyva, “Años de Desesperación: The Great Depression and the Mexican American Generation in El Paso, Texas 1929-1935” (M.A. thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 1989), 36.

contained one of the earliest concentrations of Mexican female workers. It was commonly unmarried women who entered the workforce while married women often continued to dedicate themselves to running the household. The occupations women held were primarily in the laundry industries and doing domestic work. Other women also worked as clerks and sales persons in El Paso downtown stores. Access to skilled professions, such as teaching and clerical positions, were held by Anglos and limited at times to these females due to lack of schooling and proper training.¹⁸

Lack of an education and training often left women in low paying occupations. The El Paso school systems poorly prepared Mexican women for professional work. The females were often channeled into classes emphasizing gendered manual work such as sewing, cooking, and housekeeping. Schools were essentially training young Mexican girls to be domestic girls for American households. Furthermore, female students were seldom encouraged to attend high school so high school graduation rates for Mexicans were low.¹⁹ For Mexican women this number was even lower. While attending El Paso High School, El Paso native Ramona Gonzalez recalls the school having only a handful of Mexicanas, her estimate being five Mexican American women total.²⁰ A high school diploma did not necessarily guarantee a woman a better paying job. Cleofas Calleros stated,

What was the use of a Mexican going to high school when he couldn't get a decent job? Take a girl who graduated. She went to work for \$15 a week, and she could speak English and Spanish and wait on customers in two languages. Then you have on the same counter an Anglo girl, also a high school graduate. She would be placed in charge of that Mexican girl, at the counter, and her pay would be 20 or 25 per week. And she could not wait on Mexican customers because she didn't know Spanish. There were no Mexican men or women

¹⁸ Mario T. García, "The Chicana in American History: The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880-1920." *The Pacific Historical Review* (May 1980), 324-25.

¹⁹ Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 125.

²⁰ Ramona Gonzalez, interviewed by Oscar J. Martinez, 15 May 1976.

working in the banks, none in the Electric Company, the Gas Company, the Water Company...Insurance companies never hired Mexicans.²¹

Even with an education, women could still be placed in a low paying job. A person's pay had to do with their race and gender. In the scenario given above there was a difference in pay and the basis for that difference was race.

In comparison to Anglo women, Mexican females often received significantly less pay for the same type of work.²² After graduating from high school, Mrs. Gonzalez secured a job working in an office for a local shoe store doing bookkeeping. When a woman whom she referred to as an "Americana" was hired, Mrs. Gonzalez was given the task of teaching her how to use the machines. The Anglo girl was paid twenty nine dollars while she was paid seventeen and a half for the same type of work even though Gonzalez had more experience, skill, and did more work. The same practice could be seen throughout the store with the Anglo secretary and the Mexican bookkeeper. As work became less, she states that the office staff was "pura Mexicanada," meaning it became composed purely of Mexicans. She claims the employers preferred the Mexican workers because "they were paid less and did all the work the way it should be done; and the hours, well there was no limit."²³

Exploitation of Mexican female workers was not uncommon.²⁴ As Mrs. Gonzalez stated the hours of her job were limitless, yet her pay remained the same. Even during this time, some employers preferred Mexican workers because they could pay them less wages. When someone

²¹ Calleros interview.

²² Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 57.

²³ Translated by author, Gonzalez interview, 37.

²⁴ Balderrama and Rodríguez, 57.

in the office demanded higher wages, the manager's response was "well then, do you want the job or not?"²⁵ Fear of losing their job could be enough for a worker to accept the pay.

Exploitations and low wages did not always go unchallenged by the women of El Paso. A major occupation for Mexican American women was doing domestic work in upper class homes. Garcia's 1920 study indicates that over seventy-five percent of domestics in the city were Mexican women.²⁶ A reason for this is because domestic service was the most readily available job for the Mexican women. In 1933, the domestic workers of El Paso organized themselves into a maids union and demanded higher wages. The Asociacion de Trabajadoras Domesticas or Domestic Workers' Association (DWA), was composed of local women. These housemaids wanted to establish a standard daily minimum wage.²⁷

Domestic workers argued that they found it impossible to live on their current wages. The wages for the women ranged from about \$2.50 to \$3.50 a week. Prices of commodities had been rising and even basic necessities were proving to be beyond the reach of the workers at their present wages. With their work, domestics supported not only themselves but their family as well. It was estimated that members of the association supported themselves and an average of four other persons on their wages. Those wages were at times a family's sole source of income. Josefina Morales, secretary of the Association, was supporting her family solely with her earnings as a domestic servant since her husband had been out of work.²⁸

The Domestic Workers Association's (DWA) objectives were to obtain better pay and working conditions for domestics. Domestic workers worked long hours on very low wages. Many domestics worked as much as ten to twelve hours a day; some even had to stay nights.

²⁵ Translated by author, Gonzalez interview, 37.

²⁶ Mario T. Garcia, "The Chicana in American History," 326.

²⁷ "El Paso Housemaids Ask \$1.62 Daily Wage," *El Paso Herald Post*, 5 September 1933, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

The DWA asked for a minimum wage of a dollar sixty-two daily or six dollars a week. They also sought an eight hour work day with a limit of 48 hours per week. The wages and hours sought by the association were those set by the U.S. Employment bureau, yet those standards did not apply to domestic service. Because their type of work was not recognized the members had to seek support from employers.²⁹

The DWA found it difficult to establish their work hours and pay standards because domestic service was not a recognized industry by government agencies such as the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The DWA created a committee to try and adhere to the NRA and forward their cause.³⁰ The NRA was one of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs aimed to alleviate the economic problems of the nation. One of the NRA's objectives was to stop the reduction of wages by employers.³¹ The NRA therefore encouraged each industry to establish acceptable minimum wages and codes for working hours and conditions.³² In 1936, the Department of Labor conducted a study that examined the change in the salaries of women in a range of occupations. The study showed that the greatest reduction of wages had occurred in domestic service.³³ Domestic service though was excluded from the NRA's establishment of working standards.

In response to the exception Mrs. Morales stated, "we believe it was not the intent of our president to cause our members any special sufferings or discrimination, or that the local housewives expect us to exist on our present wages." Since the women could not count on the support of agencies like the NRA the association had to work for the cooperation of El Paso

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ "Las Trabajadoras Domesticas Se Organizan y Se Adhieren a la NRA," *El Continental*, 31 August 1933, 1.

³¹ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 158-159.

³² Ibid., 158-159.

³³ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Handbook of Labor Statistics 1936 Edition* <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/congcomp> (accessed 12 March 2008), 1105.

housewives. The DWA described the approach as a “patriotic appeal” where they encouraged housewives to “only employ El Paso residents, and to refuse to employ servants who live in Juarez.”³⁴

Local activist Charles Porras helped organize the women. Porras agreed that one of the major problems the women confronted was the competition between them and domestic workers from Ciudad Juarez. It was difficult to establish a standard wage when Mexican nationals were willing to work for less. American maid employers naturally preferred the cheaper labor and were outraged by Porras and the association’s work. In an interview Porras recollects the housewives’ reaction to the effort exclaiming, “brother, the women used to go there and kick like the devil because their maids couldn’t come over before 9:00 am. We stopped a lot of them from coming at all.” Domestic workers commuting from Juarez to work in El Paso homes were seen as an obstacle to their effort, which is why the association supported the second attempt to reduce international bridges hours of operation in 1933.³⁵

The constant commuting of aliens to work in the United States was an issue that even Congress came to address during the Great Depression. The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization submitted several reports to Congress between 1934 and 1937 stating the restriction on habitual commuting of aliens from adjacent countries like Mexico to the U.S. to work.³⁶ Congress was trying to address the same issue that the Domestic Workers Association was facing. They worried aliens were taking jobs from those living in the United States. The bill described its purpose as follows:

³⁴ “El Paso Housemaids Ask \$1.62 Daily Wage,” *El Paso Herald Post*, 5 September 1933, 9..

³⁵ Charles Porras, interviewed by Oscar J. Martinez, 18 November 1975, 17.

³⁶ United States Congress. House. *To Exclude Habitual Alien Commuters*. H.R. 3679. 75th Cong., 1st sess. (January 29, 1937). <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/congcomp> (accessed 12 March 2008), 6. (The report defines the term “alien” as any individual not native born or naturalized citizen of the United States, but not to include Indians of the U.S., nor citizens of the islands under the jurisdiction of the U.S.)

Especially at a time like the present, when millions of bona-fide residents, both citizens and aliens, within the United States are unemployed, and hundreds of thousands residing in communities adjacent to our international land boundaries are now dependent on charity or are on public relief rolls, your committee is of the opinion that if these aliens desire to hold onto their jobs within the United States they should live here and spend their earnings in the country where they earn their livelihood.³⁷

Again the great concern was competition for jobs among Mexican nationals and the draining of American dollars. The restrictions were meant to prohibit persons living outside the United States from seeking work in the U.S. with the use of cards. Some commuters had working cards that allowed them to cross. Habitual commuters were defined as persons crossing the boulder more than three times a week. An article in the *Times* estimated that there were approximately 400 Juarez residents who had the border cards that enabled them to cross to work. The article also estimated that servants, maids, and washer women constituted twenty percent of those crossing to work.³⁸

While some housewives hesitantly agreed to the domestic workers minimum wage; others found them unreasonable and impossible to adhere to. One housewife claimed that she could no longer afford to employ a servant even at the old wages much less at what they were asking for now. Members of the association refused to work for less and turned down jobs at the old low wages. The maids stand was viewed as laziness and unwillingness to work. The domestics union for a moment succeeded in their efforts having at one point as many as 900 members. The Association lasted briefly as they were unable to compete with the flow of women workers coming in from across the border. Anglo housewives did not see the need to pay local workers more because they could get a woman living across the border to do it for much less. Due to the economic condition in Juarez, one could hardly blame the Juarez

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ "Says Only 400 Juarez Residents Have Jobs Here," *El Paso Times*, 26 September 1931, 2.

domestics for seeking employment in El Paso. Although the wages were low they were better than those they could be making in Juarez. The El Paso women would continue to struggle within a profession which many did not acknowledge and which they had been channeled into for being lower class Mexican women.

Another major issue concerning working women during the Great Depression was the lay off of females to provide the jobs to men. It was believed that women were taking jobs that could go to men. There was the idea that if the women gave men their jobs it would solve the unemployment problem. The jobs would be more beneficial for men who were the breadwinners of families rather than the women. Married working women in particular were heavily discriminated against in employment.³⁹

Norman Cousins challenged the idea of females taking jobs from males in his 1939 article, "Will Women Lose Their Jobs." Cousins attempted to show how mistaken this belief was by explaining that "competition in industry is between one man and another, rather than between men and women."⁴⁰ He argued that most of the jobs women held could not be filled by men because they were women's work. Men would either be unable or unwilling to do jobs generally considered a woman occupation. Thus it would not make sense to discriminate the women in the work force.

Similarly to Cousins, I argue that Mexican American women in El Paso did not take job from males. Mexican American women did not share this experience to a large extent because Mexican women did not hold many white collar jobs that could be filled by men. The jobs they held, such as laundresses and domestic servants, were not only considered women's work, but more specifically they were considered Mexican women's work. When women held these types

³⁹ Norman Cousins, "Will Women Lose Their Jobs," in *The Depression and New Deal: A History in Documents*, ed. Robert S. McElvaine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110-111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

of occupation it would be highly unlikely that they would be removed from such a job to be replaced by any males. Even Anglo upper class women would be unwilling to work in domestic service.

The Government, Organizations, and the Community

Aside from the workforce, tension within El Paso also affected the role of Mexican women in other public sectors. It is important to look at the experiences of El Paso Mexican women within other areas such as the government, organizations, and their communities. Many of the similar anti-Mexican sentiments and discrimination were also evident in the state and local agencies. Charitable organizations, such as the Associated Charities, were also discriminatory in the disbursement of relief to Mexicans. Religious organizations on the other hand embraced the opportunity to aid Mexican American women in an effort to either assimilate or convert Mexican families.

The Mexican women in El Paso not only faced discrimination in terms of job placement and wages but also in the distribution of government relief. All over the U.S. states were known to give its Mexican welfare recipients less funds than its Anglo recipients. This was a result of a perception that all Mexicans were inferior and could live on a simple diet. Therefore, they were believed to be able to get by with less money. At times, Anglo families were given more money even in comparison to Mexican family with more members.⁴¹

A stereotype about Mexicans during the Depression was that most Mexicans were unwilling to work and were on the relief rolls. It would not be unexpected that Mexicans would need assistance as they were often the ones losing jobs. The jobs that they did have paid very low wages. When the domestic workers took a stand and refused to work for low wages, the

⁴¹ Balderrama and Rodríguez, 97.

annoyed housewives viewed it as laziness and unwillingness to work. One angry housewife told the *El Paso Times* that maids were “becoming too dependent because they can get all the food they want without working down at the relief headquarters.”⁴² What housewives did not realize was that their exploitation and low pay is what at times kept those women in financial trouble and relief.

Other factors such as the deportation and repatriation pressures also affected a family’s financial situation. According to the National Catholic Welfare Conference, El Paso added approximately 600 new cases to the relief rolls due to the loss of a family’s bread winner to the deportations of 1931.⁴³ Americans believed Mexicans took away relief from better deserving white American citizens. Therefore, welfare agencies often tried to drop Mexicans from their relief rolls any way they could. For example, the local welfare agencies in El Paso would sometimes allow the Immigration Service to look through their files to find out what the recipient’s citizenship status was. The Immigration Service deported those without legal status and thus the agency succeeded in eliminating them from their relief rolls.⁴⁴

Mexicans often hesitated to seek aid as it could represent problems for them with immigration. For instance, at one point the Associated Charities of El Paso were known to stamp the passports of individuals receiving their aid with the initials *A.C.* The stamp constituted a problem when individuals attempted to cross back to El Paso after a short visit to Ciudad Juarez. The stamp was used by border officials to mark the Mexicans as public charges.⁴⁵ The Immigration Act of 1917 included a clause permitting the denial of readmission to immigrants who were considered “liable to become a public charge.” Upon noting the stamp, American

⁴² “Maids’ Union Alarms EP Housewives,” *El Paso Times*, 14 September 1933, 3.

⁴³ Balderrama and Rodríguez, 77.

⁴⁴ Manuel Bernardo Ramirez, “When the Mexicans Go Home: The Mexican Exodus 1929-1934,” (M.A. thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 1989), 74.

⁴⁵ Martinez, *Border Boom Town*, 82.

officials simply needed to refer back to the clause to justify and prevent the return of Mexicans into the U.S.⁴⁶ Officials ignored the fact that some Mexicans had been legally admitted to the country and had a right to be readmitted.⁴⁷

The stamping of documents to identify people on relief was not an uncommon practice in the United States. In California repatriates' departure cards were stamped with a similar message that read, "Los Angeles County / Department of Charities / County Welfare Dept. [*sic*] By-----." This stamp also served to stop Mexican repatriates from returning to the U.S. by labeling them as public charges.⁴⁸ With such practices it is not surprising that Mexican Americans refrained from seeking help from agencies.

Mexicans were not only discriminated against only by government agencies but charitable organizations as well. Organizations like the Associated Charities of El Paso frequently gave preference to "American" recipients. The Associated Charities was generally run by prominent Anglo women. The Association made clear that their priority was to assist the "American" families. The Associated Charities' use of American could be interpreted as synonymous with white; meaning their priority was to help the white families first. During the Depression years the aid to Mexican families in El Paso decreased and that of Anglo families increased.⁴⁹ This also reflects the feeling that the association must take care of their own first.

Anti-Mexican sentiment was not demonstrated by all agencies. Religious organizations in particular sought to help the struggling El Paso Mexican community. These organizations usually had a particular effort in mind, Americanization and conversion. Vicki Ruiz states that while some Americans sought to exclude Mexicans, other groups were eager to help and

⁴⁶ Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 91.

⁴⁷ Martínez, *Border Boom Town*, 82.

⁴⁸ Hoffman, 91.

⁴⁹ Leyva, 189-190

“Americanize” them. This feeling is best seen in the efforts of the Rose Gregory Houchen Settlement, a Methodist community center located in El Paso’s Segundo Barrio. Houchen is noteworthy because of their interests to help Mexican single women and children. The center provided important social services such as health care as well as classes in cooking, English, citizenship, and even bible study. The English and citizenship classes portray Houchen efforts to assimilate the women and their families and the bible classes the effort to join them to the Methodist church.⁵⁰

Religious groups targeted women because they viewed women as the agent that spread moral values within the family. They believed that if they could get the women to adopt “American” values and customs, they thought the children would follow.⁵¹ In his study, Garcia states that “Mexican women guarded Mexican cultural traditions within the family. Not only did the family represent the most fundamental institution brought by Mexican immigrants, but it proved to be the most resistant barrier to American assimilation.”⁵² The Houchen Settlement converted few people, despite its efforts. Although the women used the social services of the settlement very few actually became members of the Methodist church.⁵³

Upon noting the working of other organizations the Catholic Church moved to aid their Mexican members. This concern was addressed at the convention of the National Council of Catholic Women. “What could be more pleasing to our Mother Church than to do something for our unfortunates in uplifting their condition in life, and thus saving them to the Church? Remember that other groups are working amongst them and sooner or later they are lost to our

⁵⁰ Vicki L Ruíz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33-34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵² Mario T. García, “The Chicana in American History,” 322.

⁵³ Ruíz, 43.

cause.”⁵⁴ They wanted to stress the importance of taking care of their Mexican members of the church less they turn to other religious organizations.

The Catholic Church thus also extended their help to the Mexican community. Sacred Heart, a Catholic church located in south El Paso, opened up a soup kitchen to aid the struggling community. Sacred Heart served the area known as El Segundo Barrio which was primarily a poor Mexican neighborhood. When asked during an interview about her recollections on the Depression, an anonymous woman recalls the embarrassment she felt in receiving the food but explained that she had no choice. “Nosotros si nos acordamos, porque cuando íbamos a que nos dieran la comida, pues nos daba vergüenza. Pero de todos modos, pues teníamos que. ¿Pos que hacíamos?”⁵⁵ Contrary to popular belief that Mexican readily sought and accepted help, this show that they often hesitated and disliked the idea of having to accept aid. None the less she was very grateful to the parish for the meals she received.

Mexican American women also played an important role within their communities. Despite some tension among different groups many Mexicanos joined together to help each other in any way they could. During the Depression Mrs. Vega’s grandmother used to own the apartments where she lived. Mrs. Vega’s grandmother was compassionate when her tenants, all which were Mexican, could not to pay their rent on time. She herself suffered when the local bank failed and she lost her savings. From then on she acquired distrust for banks and carried her money with her everywhere she went. She understood the financial difficulties some of her tenants were enduring and did not pressure them for payment.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cleofas Calleros, “N.C.W.C. Bureau of Immigration on the Mexican Border.” (presented at the Sixteen Annual Convention of the National Council of Catholic Women, Galveston, 17- 21October 1936), 246.

⁵⁵ Tent City Worker, interviewed by Oscar J. Martinez, 2 April 1975.

⁵⁶ Estela D. Vega, interviewed by Alfredo A. Vega, 18 November 1977.

Mexicans not only helped those in their communities but also strangers. Bert Corona, an El Paso native, remembers how his grandmother and mother helped repatriates and Dust Bowl refugees from Arkansas and Oklahoma passing through the city. His grandmother was a licensed nurse in Mexico and so people often sought her help for medical treatment. Corona recalls what he saw as a boy:

It was horrible. I remember my mother and grandmother treating them; they laid the sick and injured out in the backyard. People were there, on our porch, or in the ditch next to the tracks. I remember children being born in these same places. My grandmother treated thousands, literally, during this time. Although she kept records, she didn't even know the names of some of these patients.⁵⁷

Corona's family lived near the railroad tracks, and sick or dying migrants often stopped by their house to ask for food. For this same reason his grandmother never threw away any edible leftovers.⁵⁸

Besides labor, it is important to look at the role of Mexican women in regard to the government, organizations, and within the community. The city's view toward Mexicans also affected how Mexican American women were received in each of those areas. Government and charity agencies often had discriminatory practices, but as noted, not everything portrayed injustice towards the Mexican woman. Religious groups sought to aid in an effort to assimilate them into American way of life. Lastly, in spite of the tension and hostility towards them, the Mexican community assisted themselves and others in any way they could.

⁵⁷ Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 59.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

Conclusion

The economic hardships of the Great Depression created difficult living conditions for Mexican women in El Paso. During this time intolerance towards immigrants and minorities grew. Mexican women fell into both of these categories. On one hand, they were part of an immigrant group unwanted and blamed for the country's economic trouble. On the other hand they were also females, which brought on a particular set of challenges and experiences. Their sex and race, and at times their class, made them victims of discrimination.

In the 1930s the Mexican population faced increased prejudice because of their race. Mexicans were discriminated against in the workforce because they were believed to be taking jobs from Americans. Mexicans were often the first ones to lose their jobs. American citizens of Mexican descent suffered the same fate. Legal status did matter as residents and citizens alike were treated with hostility.

Furthermore, Mexican women in the labor force experienced discrimination and exploitation. Because of their sex and race Mexican women were channeled into low paying jobs. Domestic service was a common occupation for Mexican women. These occupations lend them to exploitation and maintained them in the lower economic class. Those who managed to find work outside domestic service often received less pay than their white female coworkers for the same work.

Mexican women experienced the same inequality within government agencies and charitable organizations. The government relief agencies often gave Mexican individuals less funds because they were viewed as inferior and able to get by with less money. Charitable organizations gave Americans preference in giving assistance. In contrast, religious organizations sought to aid the Mexican community. Their aim was often to convert and

assimilate by adopting American values. Yet even their Americanization efforts reflect a view of superiority because they felt the need to uplift the Mexican women through Americanization.

The increasingly hostile conditions in the city posed a great challenge for the Mexican women of El Paso.

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