



## The Western History Association

---

The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954

Author(s): Kelly Lytle Hernández

Source: *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter, 2006), pp. 421-444

Published by: [Western Historical Quarterly, Utah State University](#) on behalf of [The Western History Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25443415>

Accessed: 23/12/2013 10:56

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Western Historical Quarterly*, Utah State University and *The Western History Association* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Western Historical Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# THE CRIMES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION: A CROSS-BORDER EXAMINATION OF OPERATION WETBACK, 1943 TO 1954

KELLY LYTLE HERNÁNDEZ

*Operation Wetback of 1954 is typically understood as a U.S. immigration law enforcement campaign that resulted in the deportation of over one million persons, mostly Mexican nationals. This article, however, uses research conducted in the United States and Mexico to trace the decade-long buildup and binational history of Operation Wetback.*

IN MAY OF 1954, U. S. ATTORNEY GENERAL Herbert Brownell issued an announcement. In the coming months, the U. S. Border Patrol would implement what he called Operation Wetback. As he explained it, Operation Wetback would be an intensive and innovative law enforcement campaign designed to confront the rapidly increasing number of illegal border crossings by Mexican nationals. As promised, during the summer of 1954, eight hundred Border Patrol officers swept through the southwestern United States performing a series of raids, road blocks, and mass deportations. By the end of the year, Brownell was able to announce that the summer campaign had been a success by contributing to the apprehension and deportation of over one million persons, mostly Mexican nationals, during 1954.

Five decades later, Brownell's public chronicling of Operation Wetback 1954 continues to draw the basic framework for understanding the campaign as an intensive U. S. law enforcement campaign targeting undocumented Mexican nationals during the summer of 1954.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Brownell's account of Operation Wetback was a decade late

---

KELLY LYTLE HERNÁNDEZ, assistant professor of history, UCLA, thanks the UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, UC MEXUS, UC MEXUS/CONACYT, UC President's Postdoctoral Program, Steve Aron, Autry Museum's Western History Workshop, Ellen DuBois, Eric Avila, Natalia Molina, Naomi Lamoreaux, and Rubén Hernández León.

<sup>1</sup> Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York, 1992), 53–61; Juan Ramon García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CN, 1980), 183–234; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004), 155–6.

*Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (Winter 2006): 421–444. Copyright © 2006, Western History Association.

and a nation short. It was ten years earlier when the U. S. Border Patrol had begun its aggressive campaign against undocumented Mexican immigration. Raids, mass deportations, and an uncompromising focus on undocumented Mexican immigration had increasingly characterized U. S. Border Patrol work since the early 1940s. Year after year, the Border Patrol's campaign to detect and deport undocumented Mexican nationals developed slowly and unevenly until its well-publicized announcement in the summer of 1954. Further, Border Patrol efforts and innovations to prevent undocumented Mexican immigration into the United States developed in close collaboration with Mexican officials and law enforcement officers seeking to limit and control unsanctioned migration out of Mexico. Together, U. S. and Mexican immigration officers devised new collaborative strategies for preventing and punishing the crime of undocumented migration. Therefore, when it is defined as an innovative, aggressive, and targeted campaign against undocumented Mexican immigration, Operation Wetback is only partially understood if framed as occurring just during the summer of 1954 and only north of the U. S.-Mexico border.

Rooted in archival research conducted in the United States and Mexico, this article digs deep into the history of Operation Wetback to tell a binational story of migration control that began long before 1954 and extended far beyond the U. S.-Mexico border. This binational history of Operation Wetback challenges the generally accepted view of Operation Wetback as a national initiative of U. S. immigration law enforcement. While it is certainly true that the U. S. Border Patrol was the primary police force involved in migration control along the U. S.-Mexico border, the cross-border history of Operation Wetback reveals how Mexican officials actively participated in the imagination and implementation of policing unsanctioned migration along the U. S.-Mexico border. Without denying the dominance of U. S. interests in U. S.-Mexican relations, Mexican officials participated in migration control along its northern border according to Mexico's domestic interests in regulating the international mobility of Mexican laborers.<sup>2</sup> This article, therefore, focuses upon Mexican collaboration with the United States Border Patrol to establish a set of law enforcement priorities and

---

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of the politics of migration control within Mexico and efforts to police border crossings into the United States, see Jaime R. Aguila, "Protecting 'México de Afuera': Mexican Emigration Policy, 1876–1928," (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2000); Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States: 1897–1931, Socioeconomic Patterns* (Tucson, 1980), 96–118; Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, "No cuenten conmigo: La política de repatriación del gobierno mexicano y sus nacionales en Estados Unidos, 1910–1928," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 19 (Summer 2003): 401–31; Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales* (1909; Alicante, MEX, reprinted 1981); Gustavo Durón González, *Problemas migratorios de México: Apuntamientos para su resolución* (Talleres de la Cámara de diputados, MEX, 1925); Moisés González Navarro, *Los Extranjeros en México y Los Mexicanos en el Extranjero, 1821–1970, vol III* (Mexico City, MEX, 1994). Although this article focuses upon the specific case of cross-border police practice, for a discussion of Mexico's efforts to control Mexican migrants and migration through its U.S. consular offices see Gilbert G. González, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest* (Austin, 1999).

practices designed to police the crimes of Mexican laborers who exited Mexico without authorization and entered the United States without sanction. This set of police practices developed slowly over a decade and across the U. S.-Mexico border, but has been narrowly understood since it was announced to the public as Operation Wetback during the summer of 1954.

As a focused police project dedicated to curbing undocumented Mexican immigration, Operation Wetback began as the lesser-known companion of the Bracero Program.<sup>3</sup> The Bracero Program (1942–1964) was a series of agreements between the U. S. and Mexican governments that facilitated the migration of short-term Mexican contract laborers into (and out of) the United States. Known as *braceros*, these laborers generally worked on southwestern farms, and U. S. and Mexican officials closely managed their migration between the United States and Mexico. The U. S. Border Patrol had little to do with managing the importation and return of *braceros*, unless the workers broke the terms of their contracts. Yet, beneath the agreement to import *braceros* were commitments to prevent Mexican laborers from surreptitiously crossing into the United States and to aggressively detect and deport those who had successfully affected illegal entry. At a time when detecting, detaining, and deporting enemy aliens could have emerged as a priority of migration control within the United States, the bilateral promises of the Bracero Program directed the U. S. Border Patrol's attention to policing the southern border and deporting undocumented Mexican nationals. There, along the southern border, the U. S. Border Patrol found the Mexican government to be a critical partner in the design and implementation of migration control strategies.

By the early 1940s, Mexico had several decades of experience in trying to limit and control Mexican emigration to the United States. President Porfirio Díaz (1876–1910) had routinely implored poor Mexicans to not go north and remain in Mexico as laborers of Mexico's modernizing economy. Díaz's ouster in 1910 brought years of revolution and political chaos, but the general political commitment to discourage Mexican emigration continued. The new Mexican Constitution of 1917 allowed its nationals the right to freely enter and exit the national territory, but Section 26 of Article 123 of the Constitution of 1917 required each Mexican to have a labor contract signed by municipal authorities and the consulate of the country where they intended to work.<sup>4</sup> This administrative restriction rendered legal labor migration of Mexican workers to

---

<sup>3</sup> Calavita, *Inside the State*; Nelson Gage Copp, "Wetbacks" and *Braceros: Mexican Migrant Laborers and American Immigration Policy, 1930–1960* (San Francisco, 1971); Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program; Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin, 1971); Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte, CA, 1964); Peter Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero: A History of the Mexican Worker in the United States from Roosevelt to Nixon* (San Francisco, 1977); Orley M. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks," and the Farm Labor Problem: Mexican Agricultural Labor in the United States, 1942–1954* (New York, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, "La Constitución de 1917 y la Emigración de Trabajadores Mexicanos a Estados Unidos," *Relaciones* 22 (Summer 2001), 205–30.

the United States virtually impossible, because U. S. law prohibited offering contracts to foreign laborers before they entered the United States. For poor Mexicans, therefore, labor migration to the United States was often a crime south of the border just as their inability to pay U. S. immigration fees and/or pass literacy exams often forced them to surreptitiously cross the border in violation of U. S. immigration law.

Still, throughout the 1920s, hundreds of thousands of Mexican laborers crossed both legally and illegally into the United States. Mexican newspapers, politicians, and activists all tried to convince them to stay in Mexico. Most often, they warned potential migrants of the humiliations of racial discrimination that awaited them in the United States and reminded them of their duty to participate in the economic development of Mexico by working south of the border. At times, Mexican officials attempted to directly interrupt illegal labor migration to the United States. For example, José Dávila of the Mexican Department of Migration in Tijuana, Baja California, reported that from 1924 to 1926, "[t]he migration service maintained stations at Torreón, Monterrey and Saltillo, Gonzalez and Irapato to keep the mexicans from coming into the United States unlawfully."<sup>5</sup> But, keeping Mexicans in Mexico was a nearly impossible task when confronting poverty in Mexico and agribusiness expansion in the United States.

It was only the onset of the Great Depression that turned Mexican migrants around. In this unique moment of diminished employment opportunities in the United States, more Mexicans returned to Mexico than entered the United States.<sup>6</sup> Mobilization for World War II in the United States and a campaign of rapid industrialization within Mexico, however, once again jumpstarted Mexican immigration to the United States during the early 1940s. In particular, as many U. S. citizens joined the armed services or moved into higher paying industrial jobs, agribusiness-men in the southwestern United States actively recruited laborers from Mexico to work north of the border. At the same time, the Mexican government pursued a program of industrializing its agricultural sector.<sup>7</sup> Land privatization, mechanization, and the export orientation of agricultural production combined with food shortages and a dramatic rise in the Mexican population to force many Mexican *campesinos* (rural laborers) to seek economic

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Jose M. Dávila, set I, filed notes series B, folder 5, Mexican Labor in US, carton 10, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque, 1995), 121.

<sup>7</sup> Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910–1989* (Austin, 1993), 159–98; John Mason Hart, *Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Berkeley, 2002), 403–31; Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938–1954* (Wilmington, DE, 1995) and *The Impact of War: Mexico and World War II*, Occasional Paper no. 10, La Trobe University Institute of Latin American Studies (Melbourne, AUS, 1988).

survival through migration.<sup>8</sup> They moved within Mexico and across the U. S.-Mexico border in search of work.<sup>9</sup>

The Mexican government hoped to limit the loss of its citizens and laborers to its northern neighbor. Not only was massive emigration to the United States a shameful exposure of the failure of the Mexican Revolution to provide economic well-being for many of Mexico's citizens, but it also drained the country of one of its greatest natural resources, a cheap and flexible labor supply.<sup>10</sup> The loss of laborers and inability to regulate labor mobility worried many social, political, and economic leaders at a time when Mexico was deeply engaged in a project of modernizing the countryside. Mexico did not have much capital (that would come from the United States), but it could invest a cheap and flexible labor supply into the project for industrialization. Uncontrolled international mobility of agricultural workers, however, undermined Mexican industrialists' ability to leverage this resource. Mexican political leaders imagined the Bracero Program as a program of managed migration that offered the Mexican government the opportunity to control the international mobility of poor Mexican *campesinos*.<sup>11</sup> Control, however, was elusive as undocumented migration increased alongside the Bracero Program.

Within weeks of negotiating the Bracero agreement, tens of thousands of unemployed and underemployed Mexicans learned of the opportunity to work in the United States and headed to the recruitment center that had been established in Mexico City. When they arrived, however, many learned that they were not eligible to sign up for the program. Only healthy young men with agricultural experience, but without land, who had secured a written recommendation from local authorities verifying that their labor was not locally needed, were eligible for *bracero* contracts. Many poor Mexicans, who were too young or too old, too sick, or female, were turned away by Mexican authorities. Disappointed by the limits of the Bracero Program, many poor Mexicans headed to the U. S.-Mexico border, where they crossed without the authorization of

---

<sup>8</sup> The growth of documented and undocumented Mexican immigration during the 1940s is addressed by Calavita, *Inside the State*; García, *Operation Wetback*; and Wayne A. Cornelius, *Mexican Migration to the United States: Causes, Consequences, and US Responses*, Migration and Development Study Group, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, (Cambridge, MA, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> For discussions of internal migrations within Mexico during the 1940s and 1950s, see Humberto Muñoz et al, *Mexico City, Industrialization, Migration, and the Labour Force, 1930–1970* (New York, 1982) and Tomás Martínez Saldaña, *El costo social de un éxito político: la política expansionista del Estado mexicano en el agro lagunero* (Chapingo, MEX, 1980), 36–8.

<sup>10</sup> García, *Operation Wetback*, 22–5 and Casey Walsh, "Development in the Borderlands: Cotton Capitalism, State Formation, and Regional Political Culture in Northern Mexico" (PhD diss., New School University, 2001), 468–500.

<sup>11</sup> Casey Walsh, "Demobilizing the Revolution: Migration, Repatriation, and Colonization in Mexico, 1911–1940," Working Paper 26 for the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (La Jolla, CA, 2000), 23–4.

the Mexican government or the sanction of the U. S. government. Therefore, even though the Bracero Program delivered two million legal temporary Mexican workers to U. S. farms and ranches between 1942 and 1964, an increasingly large number of Mexicans were working illegally outside of Mexico and within the United States during the same years.<sup>12</sup>

Once illegal immigration to the United States grew alongside the Bracero Program, various Mexican interest groups pressured their government representatives to end unsanctioned Mexican migration across the U. S.-Mexico border. Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946), whose election marked a conservative turn in Mexican national politics, received requests from landholders in the state of Jalisco complaining about the loss of 350 to 400 men and their families to migration.<sup>13</sup> Agribusinessmen along Mexico's northern border were particularly vocal in their protests that cotton was rotting in the fields because Mexican laborers chose to cross the border for higher wages rather than work within Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Some of the earliest and most pressing demands came from landholders in Mexico's most productive and profitable zones of cotton farming, the Mexicali Valley of Baja California and the Matamoros/Reynosa region in Tamaulipas.<sup>15</sup> Agribusinessmen in these regions demanded placement of the Mexican military along the border to prevent unsanctioned border crossings into the United States by Mexican cotton pickers.<sup>16</sup> They and other businessmen had objected to establishing the Bracero Program. As they saw it, the Bracero Program was a bilateral system that facilitated the loss of agricultural laborers to the United States. They had argued that the Mexican government should not encourage Mexican migration while pursuing an internal project of economic development and industrialization that needed Mexican laborers to remain south of the border and fuel Mexico's economy. Their protests were joined by the voices of *braceros* working within the United States who resented undocumented emigration because they believed undocumented Mexican workers lowered wages and worsened working conditions while many Mexicans in

---

<sup>12</sup> Calavita, *Inside the State*, 28–41; Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 58–71; García, *Operation Wetback*; Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York, 2002), 34–41.

<sup>13</sup> File 546.6/120, box 793, Fondo de Manuel Ávila Camacho [hereafter FMAC], Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City [hereafter AGN].

<sup>14</sup> File 545.3/98, box 587, Fondo de Miguel Alemán Valdés [hereafter FMAV], AGN and file 548.1/19, box 803, FMAC, AGN.

<sup>15</sup> For a history of the political economy of cotton farming in the Matamoros region see, Saldaña, *El costo social de un éxito político*, 15–43; Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, *El Valle Bajo del Río Bravo, Tamaulipas, en la Década de 1930: El Desarrollo Regional en la Posrevolución a Partir de la Irrigación, la Migración Interna y los Repatriados de Estados Unidos* (Ciudad Victoria, MEX, 2003); Walsh, "Development in the Borderlands."

<sup>16</sup> File 546.6/120-1, box 793, FMAC, AGN.



general resented the loss of citizens and workers to the “colossus” of the north.<sup>17</sup> The Mexican government responded to these demands by improving the enforcement of its own emigration laws and used the Bracero Program as an opportunity to negotiate the deportation of illegal Mexican labor out of the United States.

Soon after the Bracero Program began, Mexican officials hosted a meeting in Mexico City with representatives of the U. S. Department of State, the U. S. Department of Justice, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the U. S. Border Patrol. At this meeting, Mexican officials demanded that in exchange for participating in the facilitation of legal immigration through the Bracero Program, the United States needed to improve border control and return to Mexico those who surreptitiously crossed into the United States.<sup>18</sup> These demands for improved control over unsanctioned entry into the United States linked the U. S. Border Patrol directly to the Bracero Program.

To address the mounting problem of illegal immigration alongside the Bracero Program, the U. S. Border Patrol “committed itself to strengthen the Patrol force along the Mexican Border by the means of filling all existing vacancies and detailing approximately 150 Patrol Inspectors from other areas to the Mexican border.”<sup>19</sup> The shift of additional Border Patrol officers to the southern border transformed the national organization of the U. S. Border Patrol. Prior to 1943, more U. S. Border Patrol officers worked along the northern border than along the southern. However, the majority of new officers hired after 1943 were assigned to stations along the U. S.-Mexico border.<sup>20</sup> Growth of the Border Patrol budget in 1940 and the shift of personnel in late 1943 almost doubled the number of Border Patrol Inspectors working in the U. S.-Mexico borderlands.<sup>21</sup> After 1943, the Mexican border became the center of operations for the U. S. Border Patrol, but when more officers did not automatically result in higher numbers of deportations, Mexican officials continued to press the United States for results.

On 11 December 1943, the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D. C. wrote to the U. S. Secretary of State requesting that the U. S. government “adopt the measures

---

<sup>17</sup> File 546.6/1-32, box 594, FMAV; file 546.6/1-27, box 594, FMAV, 1; file 546.6/120-1, box 793, FMAC, 3. All files located at AGN.

<sup>18</sup> Although the United States rarely afforded Mexico much influence in U.S.-Mexican relations, during World War II many officials wanted to retain the support of a neighboring country while others wanted improved access to Mexican workers. The early 1940s, was a unique period in which Mexico was able to influence U.S. policy on issues of migration.

<sup>19</sup> “Salaries and Expenses 1946,” 139, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services Historical Reference Library, Washington, DC (hereafter USCISHRL).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Tait Jarnagin, “The Effect of Increased Illegal Mexican Migration upon the Organization and Operations of the United States Immigration Border Patrol, Southwest Region” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1957), 90.

<sup>21</sup> *Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor for Fiscal Year ending 1940* (Washington DC, 1941), 111.



which may be appropriate to prevent the illegal entry” of Mexican workers not in possession of *bracero* contracts.<sup>22</sup> The Mexican Secretaría de Gobernación had already “given orders to its border offices to redouble their efforts to prevent the undocumented workers. . .from departing from the national territory,” but requested additional assistance from U. S. border officials.<sup>23</sup> Mexico requested such assistance because of the law enforcement challenges presented by border policing and because “the economy of Mexico is suffering serious losses through the surreptitious departure of workers.”<sup>24</sup> To underscore the seriousness of the problem for Mexico, the Mexican Embassy warned the U. S. Department of State that if control was not established over the flow of illegal immigration into the U. S., Mexico would “affect a complete revision of the [Bracero] agreements.”<sup>25</sup> In response, on 12 December 1943, J. F. McGurk, assistant chief of the Division of the American Republics wrote for U. S. Secretary of State to Earl Harrison, commissioner of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service that

[t]he [State] Department considers it desirable to cooperate in this respect with the Mexican Government in every appropriate manner, and any steps which the Immigration and Naturalization Service may take to maintain or to extend its vigilance to prevent clandestine and illegal entry of Mexican workers into the United States will insure the continuance of these important [bracero] agreements and will therefore redound to the benefit of both Governments.<sup>26</sup>

Within six months of the Mexican Embassy’s threat to revise the Bracero Program, the chief supervisor of the U. S. Border Patrol, W. F. Kelly, launched an “intensive drive on Mexican aliens” by deploying “Special Mexican Deportation Parties” throughout the country.<sup>27</sup> The Special Mexican Deportation Parties were small teams of U. S. Border Patrol officers specifically directed to target, apprehend, and deport undocumented Mexican nationals. For example, on 14 June 1944, Kelly ordered the Border Patrol stations in Minnesota and North Dakota to detail officers to Chicago and to perform special raids against Mexican nationals.<sup>28</sup> The next day, Border Patrol officers

---

<sup>22</sup> 12 December 1943 memo, no. 9956, from the Mexican Embassy in Washington, DC, file 56161/109, box 2662, RG 85, acc 58A734, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, [hereafter NARA].

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 13 November 1944 memo from Carson Morrow to District Director, file 56364/43 sw pt. 1, box 91, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>28</sup> 9 June 1944 memo from Andrew Jordan, District Director Chicago to Commissioner General of INS regarding “Mexican Aliens,” file 55853/313A, box 439, RG 85, acc 58A734, NARA.

in McAllen, Texas, completed a drive upon Mexican nationals that resulted in over 6,900 apprehensions.<sup>29</sup>

The 1943 shift in personnel to the southern border and the Special Mexican Deportation Parties of 1944 marked the beginning of the U. S. Border Patrol's intense focus upon Mexican nationals. The new focus and strategies had multiple effects. First, the number of apprehensions of deportable aliens made by U. S. Border Patrol officers in the Mexican border region increased from 11,775 in 1943 to 28,173 in 1944. Although a rise in undocumented Mexican immigration certainly did occur during the 1940s, the quiet emergence of a U. S. Border Patrol priority to apprehend Mexican nationals combined with new strategies contributed to the dramatic boom in the number of apprehensions made in the Mexican border region. Of those apprehended after 1944, the number of Mexicans as a percentage of the national total number of apprehensions increased from a roving average of 17 percent to 56 percent between 1924 and 1940 to a steady average of over 90 percent between 1943 and 1954. Operation Wetback, a campaign of aggressively targeting Mexican nationals for interrogation, apprehension, and deportation, had begun.

The U.S. Border Patrol's shift to the Mexican border in 1943 and focus upon Mexican nationals in 1944 created quick results by dramatically increasing the number of Mexican nationals apprehended and deported. But, the problem of increasing the number of deportations without altering the method of deportation was quickly apparent. When the U. S. Border Patrol released deportees at the border, deportees simply and easily re-entered the United States. Deportation was, at best, a temporary condition that failed to deliver increased control over the mobility of undocumented Mexican immigrants. Therefore, soon after the Special Mexican Deportations began, U. S. and Mexican officials initiated a conversation about how to prevent deportees from easily slipping out of Mexico and into the United States. On 11 January 1945 they reached an agreement whereby the United States Border Patrol would deport Mexican nationals who were residents of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Jalisco through Nogales, Arizona, and residents of eastern and southern Mexican states through El Paso, Texas. For their part, Mexican officials agreed to "accept delivery of the aliens in question through its immigration officials at the ports opposite El Paso and Nogales and to divert them to localities in the Interior."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, rather than just releasing deportees at the border, U. S. Border Patrol officers began to deliver Mexican deportees into the custody of Mexican immigration officials who would forcibly relocate the deportees to points

---

<sup>29</sup> 15 July 1944 memo from H.P. Brady to W.F. Kelly, file 55853/314B, box 439, acc 58A734, NARA.

<sup>30</sup> 27 November 1945 memo from Joseph Savoretti to Grover C. Wilmoth, District Director of El Paso, "Removal of Mexican nationals apprehended in the Los Angeles District through El Paso and Nogales," file 55853/300D, box 437, RG 85, acc 58A734, NARA.



Figure 1. Mexican officers guarding deportees awaiting the train-lift, 1952. U. S. Immigration Official Photograph File No. 46-21. Courtesy of the National Border Patrol Museum, El Paso, Texas.

south of the border. After several months of preparation, this practice began in April of 1945.<sup>31</sup>

The preferred method of transporting deportees to the interior of Mexico was by train. According to funding throughout the 1940s and 1950s, train-lifts removed between six hundred and one thousand migrants weekly to Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León, Torreón in the state of Coahuila, and/or Jiménez in the state of Chihuahua. In addition to the more cost-effective train-lifts, in 1951 U. S. and Mexican officials introduced daily plane flights, or airlifts, from Holtville, California, and Brownsville, Texas, to central Mexican states, such as San Luis Potosí, Guadalajara, Guanajuato. That year, 34,057 migrants were airlifted to the interior of Mexico. The following year, 51,504 Mexicans were airlifted to central Mexico, but Congress made no appropriations for airlifts in 1953, and the practice was stalled until again funded in 1954.<sup>32</sup>

Whether using trains or planes, the procedure for coordinating deportation into the interior of Mexico was similar. Typically, U. S. Border Patrol officers apprehended undocumented Mexican nationals within the United States and took them to an INS

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The planelifts occurred sporadically, relying on erratic appropriations from the U.S. Congress, members of which received multiple complaints from southwestern agribusiness about mass deportations of their workers.

detention center along the California or Texas border. At the detention center, officers determined the method of removal that would be offered to each immigrant. If migrants were residents of an adjacent border area, they would be allowed to simply cross back into Mexico and remain in the border area without further penalty or surveillance. If they were from the interior, however, Border Patrol officers tagged them for a train-lift or air-lift. Residents of northern Mexican states would generally be designated for deportation by train to Monterrey, Torreón, or Chihuahua, while residents of “the balance of Mexico” would be designated to return by plane to central Mexico.<sup>33</sup>

Once all of the necessary information was gathered, the Border Patrol transported deportees by plane, train, or bus to the U. S. border port from where they would be deported. While the Border Patrol released residents of the border areas from U. S. custody at the border, residents of the interior were released into the custody of Mexican officers. For example, the procedure for the train-lift to Chihuahua, México, was for U. S. Border Patrol officers to drive a busload of migrants to the “middle of the bridge” that connected Presidio, Texas, to Ojinaga, México.<sup>34</sup> At the middle of the bridge, all Border Patrol and/or INS personnel would “leave the bus and return to the inspection station.”<sup>35</sup> As the U. S. officers left the bus, Mexican officers entered to “conduct the party from the middle of the bridge to the railroad station.”<sup>36</sup> At this point, the deportees and the financial responsibility for their detention, supervision, transportation, and care were officially transferred from the United States to Mexico.

On the Mexican side of the Presidio/Ojinaga bridge, the Mexican officers directed the bus to the train station in Ojinaga, Mexico. There, they placed the migrants under armed guard. To make the transfer complete, a few of the Mexican officers returned the empty bus to the center of the bridge where they would disembark and U. S. officers would re-enter and drive the bus back to the U.S. Immigration station in Presidio, Texas.

Back at the train station in Ojinaga, the migrants waited until a train was ready to take them south. As they waited, perhaps they would be lectured by a Mexican official that “it was useless for them (returnees) to return to the United States as no demand

---

<sup>33</sup> If a resident of the adjacent border area had already been apprehended several times he might also be subject to deportation to the interior. Generally, only men were sent by plane-lift, while women and family groups were trainlifted. File 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A2033, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland [hereafter NARA CPM].

<sup>34</sup> 20 September 1956 memo from Marcus Neelly, District Director El Paso to E.D. Kelliher, Chief, Detention, Deportation and Parole, El Paso, file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A2033, NARA CPM. For a similar scenario, see 5 November 1957 memo regarding “AIRLIFT—Reynosa to Leon, Guanajuato” from John P. Swanson, Assistant Regional Commissioner for Enforcement, Southwest Region to All Chief Patrol Inspectors, Southwest Region, file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A0233, NARA CPM.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

existed for labor.”<sup>37</sup> If they complained about being forcibly removed to the interior of Mexico, an officer of the Mexican Department of Migration may have explained that they had broken Mexican law by emigrating without the proper documents and were, therefore, in no position to dispute their removal to the interior.<sup>38</sup> When the trains were ready, the guards placed the migrants on board and escorted them to their final destination somewhere farther south of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Cross-border collaboration expanded the possibilities of migration control along the U. S.-Mexico border. Although police practice is defined as a site of state violence that is limited by the boundaries of the nation-state, the cross-border policing of migrants linked the distinct territories of U. S. and Mexican police authority. At all times, U. S. and Mexican officers respected the limits represented by the border. They disembarked from the buses and exchanged custody of deportees at the line between the two countries. With cross-border collaboration, however, U. S. and Mexican officers were able to transform the line that marked the limits of their jurisdictions into a bridge that linked rather than divided the two distinct systems of migration control.<sup>39</sup> Upon that bridge the consequences for unsanctioned border crossing were merged. No longer were the detentions and dislocations that accompanied migration control isolated within one nation or territory. In the United States, those identified as illegal immigrants were subject to surveillance, detention, and deportation. In Mexico, they would face the disruptions and anxieties of forced dislocation to unfamiliar places. In each location, however, the consequences of having committed the symbiotic crimes of unsanctioned emigration and undocumented immigration were bound together through the collaborative practices of U. S.-Mexican migration control.

Reports regarding the conditions of the lifts and treatment of returnees vary significantly. While Mexican officials participating in the program tended to report that the lifts were conducted “without incident” and that they were “pleased with the arrangement,” journalists, migrants, and activists tended to comment less favorably.<sup>40</sup> For example, Frank Ferree was a U. S. veteran and self-declared champion of

---

<sup>37</sup> 27 June 1957 memo regarding “Movement of Buslifted Aliens” from P.A. Reyes, Patrol Inspector El Paso to Chief Patrol Inspector, El Paso, file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A0233, NARA CPM.

<sup>38</sup> “Desordenes públicos entre braceros que conducía el barco platanero Mercurio I en el río Pánuco,” file 4/009/1, box 2256, Archivo Histórico del Instituto Nacional de Migración (Mexico City, MEX).

<sup>39</sup> I have benefited enormously from the growing body of literature on transnational policing. See Malcolm Anderson, *Policing the World: Interpol and the Politics of International Police Cooperation* (New York, 1989); Ethan A. Nadelmann, *Cops Across Borders: The Internationalization of U.S. Criminal Law Enforcement* (University Park, PA, 1993); J.W.E. Sheptycki, “Transnational Policing and the Makings of a Postmodern State,” *British Journal of Criminology* 35 (Autumn 1995): 613–35 and Sheptycki, ed. *Issues in Transnational Policing* (New York, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> 30 January 1958 from the Regional Commissioner, San Pedro, California, pages 5–6, file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A0233, NARA CPM.

the Mexican worker who was disturbed by the poor living and working conditions of undocumented Mexican laborers in South Texas. Ferree actively lobbied both the U. S. and Mexican governments for reform in U. S. and Mexican immigration law that forced poor Mexicans into undocumented migration. Ferree often accompanied the deportees on the train-lifts to distribute food and medicine and reported that the train-lifts were “indescribable scenes of human misery and tragedy” as poor, and often sick, deportees were forced onto guarded trains and taken to unfamiliar places.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes, he reported, deportees would jump from the moving trains and be half-heartedly shot at by Mexican officers guarding the train-lift. Although Ferree provides no explanation of why the migrants would jump from the train, others suggested that perhaps they jumped as they passed through areas closer to their homes than their final destination. Or, as one U. S. Border Patrol report suggested, perhaps they jumped because “upon arrival at the depot [the deportees] are sometimes dealt with rather harshly by the [Mexican] authorities.”<sup>42</sup>

With a similarly negative story to tell, deportee Juan Silos spoke with a journalist from *El Heraldo de Chihuahua* as he awaited a train-lift in Reynosa, México. Silos complained that Mexican officers had beaten him over the head with an iron rod until his head bled. For years the Mexican press and politicians had warned migrants against going to the United States, where they would be subject to racial discrimination and violence. But, according to Silos, the violence experienced by him and the other deportees within Mexico made him wonder, “why they talk about discrimination towards workers abroad, when here brothers of our own race almost kill us.”<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, the experiences of Ferree and Silos are only rare glimpses into those of the tens of thousands of migrants relocated on hundreds of trips into the interior of Mexico during the 1940s and 1950s. Mixing prevention and punishment, however, the lifts scattered migrants to places far south of the border and often far from their homes. Distance from the border and their hometowns dislocated migrants from the established social networks that facilitate undocumented migration. The lifts, therefore, transformed traditional unilateral deportation out of the United States into a bilateral technique of migration control through population dispersal and disorder that reached deep into Mexico. The shallow record kept of Mexican contributions to policing unsanctioned emigration along its northern border, however, has made Mexican efforts at migration control difficult to uncover.

There had long been significant public pressure within Mexico to end undocumented emigration, but the violence, dislocation, and disorder that migration control

---

<sup>41</sup> *Valley Evening (McAllen, Texas) Monitor*, 18 July 1952.

<sup>42</sup> 17 July 1957 memo from the Acting Intelligence Office, El Paso, Texas to the Chief Patrol Inspector of El Paso, Texas regarding “Treatment of Buslifted Aliens,” file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A0233, NARA CPM.

<sup>43</sup> “Que Son Tratados Como Bestias Los Braceros Deportados,” *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, 7 de Mayo, 1956, file 546.6/55, box 883, Fondo Adolfo Ruíz Cortines [hereafter FARC] AGN.



required Mexican law enforcement officers to subject Mexican nationals to would always be unwanted and unwelcome. Officials involved in the forced removal of deportees to the interior steered the lifts away from Mexico City, which was the hub of Mexico's media, and toward locations that either needed the labor or appreciated the dollars that deportees returned with in their pockets.<sup>44</sup> Reporters who did attempt to cover the train-lifts from Reynosa, México, were removed from the trains. Migration control in Mexico, therefore, received significantly less press coverage than in the United States where this particular site of intensifying police activity was directed against foreign nationals. Further, Mexican officials kept fewer digests and correspondence regarding deportation procedures south of the border. Despite the near silence south of the border that makes it difficult to resuscitate a clear image of what occurred once deportees crossed into the custody of Mexican officers, the traces and indications that do remain suggest that the intensification of policing undocumented Mexican immigration during the 1940s was inspired, imagined, and implemented according to cross-border needs and possibilities of migration control that were first seen, negotiated, and realized within the framework of the Bracero Program.

While U. S.-Mexico collaboration expanded during the 1940s, the Mexican government continued to fund its own independent campaigns dedicated to preventing the unsanctioned emigration of Mexican laborers into the United States. In particular, when breakdowns in negotiations for the Bracero Program severed the cross-border negotiations for migration control, Mexico strengthened its own border enforcement. For example, between October of 1948 and August of 1949, the Bracero Program was suspended because of disagreements between U. S. and Mexican officials regarding the conditions of the labor contract for *bracero* workers. During that time, U. S. Border Patrol activity weakened. As the primary immigration law enforcement agency working north or south of the border, U. S. Border Patrol retrenchment significantly threatened Mexico's interests in funding domestic industrialization with its cheap, surplus labor supply. By July 1949, the Mexican government declared a national emergency because cotton farmers in the Reynosa/Matamoros region complained that too many Mexican workers were illegally crossing into the United States rather than accepting work on Mexican border farms.<sup>45</sup> That month, five-thousand Mexican troops patrolled the U. S.-Mexico border in San Pedro, Tamaulipas, and worked within the cities and countryside detaining migrants until they accepted labor contracts with Mexican cotton growers.<sup>46</sup> The Mexican Agricultural Bank supported the military's efforts to turn Mexican migrants into Mexican workers and encouraged the use of "forced labor" if migrants did not willingly submit to working within Mexico. Mexican Government

---

<sup>44</sup> 30 January 1958, untitled memo from Regional Commissioner, San Pedro California, file 659.4 pt. 1, box 13, RG 85, acc 67A0233, NARA CPM.

<sup>45</sup> *Novedades (Mexico City)*, 25 July 1949.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 July 1949.



officials denied coercing migrants to work in the fields, but local journalists published interviews with migrants who claimed that “The Municipal Authorities Sell Them Like Slaves.”<sup>47</sup> Soldiers were also accused of threatening migrants, telling them that they would be sent to jail unless they worked for Mexican agribusinessmen. The threat resonated with migrants whose friends and acquaintances had been apprehended and placed in the municipal jail after being deported from the United States, according to a 1947 law which established a punishment of 2 to 5 years’ imprisonment and up to a 10,000-peso fine for Mexicans who attempted to leave or left Mexican national territory without the proper authorization from the Mexican Secretaría de Gobernación.<sup>48</sup> With the assistance of officers of the Mexican Department of Migration and municipal police, the military claimed to have stopped all illegal emigration in the area.<sup>49</sup> The Mexican military, Mexican Migration officers, and municipal officials remained vigilant in the Reynosa/Matamoros area until a new *bracero* agreement was signed in August 1949. Once again, Mexican authorities reported good relations with officers of the United States Border Patrol who deported Mexican workers into areas experiencing labor shortages in the Reynosa/Matamoros region.<sup>50</sup> But, when disputes derailed the Bracero Program again in the spring of 1953, Mexico returned five thousand troops to the border to stop undocumented emigration. By August, reinforcements arrived and patrols were placed well south of the border. This time, rather than risk another mass exodus of Mexican laborers that would threaten the cotton crop of the lucrative Reynosa/Matamoros region, the Mexican Department of Migration established a Mexican Border Patrol force of twenty-five officers assigned to police the border just below South Texas.<sup>51</sup>

The captain of the Mexican Border Patrol, Alberto Moreno, worked with what one Mexican newspaper described as a “hand of steel” dedicated to arresting migrant smugglers and undocumented immigrants when they illegally crossed back into Mexico.<sup>52</sup> Chief Patrol Inspector Fletcher Rawls of the U. S. Border Patrol in El Paso, Texas, valued Captain Moreno’s work on the southern side of the border. He “is tearing up boats by the bunches (I think shooting up a few) and is cooperating with us very good,” explained Rawls to his district director within the Immigration Naturalization

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21 July 1949.

<sup>48</sup> González Navarro, *Los Extranjeros en México*, 46.

<sup>49</sup> *Novedades*, 26 July 1949 and 27 July 1949.

<sup>50</sup> File 546.6/1-27, box 594, FMAV, AGN.

<sup>51</sup> 16 October 1953 letter from W.F. Kelly, Assistant Commissioner to William Belton, Officer in Charge, Mexican Affairs Division, Department of State and enclosed articles “Captain Alberto Moreno works with a Hand of Steel with his Patrol Agents on Those who Commit any Irregularity” and “Two More Boatmen are Apprehended,” file 811.06/Mexico/12-453, box 4407, RG 59, NARA CPM.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Service.<sup>53</sup> "If we can keep this man over there and he continues to receive the backing from Mexico City, he is going to be a big help to us," continued Rawls, who appreciated the expanded possibilities of policing and punishing unsanctioned migration when U. S. and Mexican officers cooperated along the border.<sup>54</sup>

Migrants routinely frustrated U. S. and Mexican officers by using the border as a barrier against U. S. and Mexican immigration law enforcement. The residents of Tampico, a large migrant camp just north of the South Texas border, for example, lived outside the grasp of Mexican authorities, but rushed south to flee the jurisdiction of U. S. officers when the U. S. Border Patrol raided the camp.<sup>55</sup> The establishment of the Mexican Border Patrol, however, limited their ability to exploit the limits that the border placed upon the distinct jurisdictions of U. S. and Mexican law enforcement.

"This morning we made a run at 'Tampico,'" wrote Fletcher Rawls, who was eager to report about recent successes in collaborative U. S. and Mexican Border Patrol activities.<sup>56</sup> Officers of the U. S. Border Patrol had raided the camp from the north, east, and west, and "as usual" Rawls reported, "all the aliens ran for the river."<sup>57</sup> But this time, to the immigrants' "amazement," "the Mexican officials were on the Mexican side and several shots were fired from the Mexican side (pretty close) directing the aliens to remain on the American side which they did and all were picked up by the patrol."<sup>58</sup> The raid of the U. S. Border Patrol from the north, east, and west and the gunfire of the Mexican Border Patrol from the south created what Rawls explained as "a very surprised and frightened group of people."<sup>59</sup>

For Tampico's unsanctioned migrants, the protection once offered by the border had evaporated within the squeeze between U. S. and Mexican Border Patrol officers. Cross-border cooperation meant that they were policed within the United States, within Mexico, and between the two. There, between the two, migrants scrambled to evade arrest. Many succeeded and many failed, but cross-border cooperation made unsanctioned migration more difficult overall by reducing the limits that the border imposed upon police officers. Further, the officers of the U. S. and Mexican Border Patrols leveraged the new linkages between their distinct jurisdictions of policing to punish those who committed the crime of illegal immigration.

One of the most nagging problems for U. S. Border Patrol officers were cases of "chronic offenders" who were able to escape forced relocation to the interior by claiming

---

<sup>53</sup> 20 September memo from Fletcher Rawls, file 56364/43 sw pt. 3, box 91, acc 59A2038, NARA. Unknown year, however document is filed with records from 1953.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> American G.I. Forum, *What Price Wetback?* (Austin, 1953), 17.

<sup>56</sup> 20 September memo from Fletcher Rawls.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

residency in a border city. "You'd take them across the river and sometimes they beat you back across," explained Bob Salinger, patrol inspector in charge of the Mission, Texas, station in the early 1950s.<sup>60</sup> Salinger "got fed up" with the "chronic offenders" who "you'd see. . . day after day" and "promoted a pair of clippers" to be carried in each Border Patrol car and instructed the officers to shave the heads of "chronic offenders."<sup>61</sup> After they had put migrants through what Salinger described as "a little barbershop for the chronic offenders," he instructed his officers: "You're going to have to take them straight over the river and kick them across after you clip their heads. We can't run them through the camp."<sup>62</sup> Salinger was aware that the "little barbershop" was unsanctioned and unofficial, and consciously pushed the practice underground. But soon his officers became lax in their efforts to conceal the Border Patrol barber shop. When eight chronic offenders broke free of an officer one day and began "thumbing their nose" at him, he re-apprehended them and "decided they needed their heads clipped, so he peeled all of them."<sup>63</sup> He had "made an Apache out of some of them, cut crosses on their heads, just the long-haired ones. One ole boy had a big bushy mustache, he'd shaved off half of it."<sup>64</sup> Salinger believed the officer had done "a good job of it," but when the head-shaven immigrants were processed through the detention center, Chief Patrol Inspector Fletcher Rawls ordered the Mission, Texas, station to stop "peeling" Mexican heads, while he investigated whether or not head shaving violated the civil rights of detainees. When Mexican newspapers began to expose and condemn the practice, which had also independently emerged in California, Rawls was forced to put distance between the Border Patrol and head peeling. The needed political distance was available just a few feet away. Rawls contacted the head of the Mexican Border Patrol who agreed to pick up the practice of head shaving south of the border until the civil rights issues it presented within the United States could be worked out. Mexican officers conducted head shaving until several years later, when the practice was officially performed at U. S. Border Patrol detention centers for sanitary purposes.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Bob Salinger (pseudonym) oral history, interview by David Burnett, 4 April 1987. National Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, Texas (hereafter NBPM).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> 20 September memo from Fletcher Rawls. Also, see 4 May 1950 interview with Francisco Wallis-Diaz, file 56084/74A, box 2152, RG 85, acc 58A734, NARA; 12 March 1957 memo from Frank Partridge to David Carnahan regarding "Parasitic Infestation," file 56364/43.39, box 98, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA; 7 May 1953 memo from W.F. Kelly, file 56364/43 sw pt. 3, box 91, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA; 12 June 1950 memo from Albert Del Guercio to Commissioner of INS regarding "Newspaper article alleging mistreatment of Mexican aliens," file 56084/74A, box 2152, RG 85, acc 58A734, NARA.

At the limits of their authority, U. S. and Mexican officers were frustrated by the challenges that the border presented to policing the crime of illegal immigration. Together, however, they developed new techniques and practices that leveraged the limits of the border and exploited the distinct political cultures within each country. Head shavings were among the most informal developments within the system of bilateral migration control that first developed among upper officials of each country, but were implemented by officers working day-to-day along the borderline. Their inventions transformed the border into an opportunity for imagining policing and coordinating state violence beyond the limits of the nation-state.

At the same time that U. S. and Mexican officers were working to negotiate the limits that the border placed upon policing and state violence, they fortified the physical divide between the two nations to deepen the dangers that the borderlands presented to unsanctioned migrants. With fences and coordinated surveillance, U. S. and Mexican officers pushed those who dared to cross the border without sanction into the backlands and waters of the border landscape. There, in the backlands and border waters, their deaths were the product of strategies pursued by U. S. and Mexican officials and were a reminder of the most extreme consequence of being policed.

In 1945, U. S. Border Patrol authorities began to recognize a shift in illegal border crossings away from the El Paso, Texas, area to the California border. To confront the rise in illegal crossings across the California border, the Immigration and Naturalization Service delivered "4,500 lineal feet of chain link fencing (10 feet high, woven of No. 6 wire) to the International Boundary and Water Commission at Calexico, California."<sup>66</sup> Although the INS was not erecting a continuous line of fence along the borderline, they hoped that strategic placement of the fence would "compel persons seeking to enter the United States illegally to attempt to go around the ends of the fence."<sup>67</sup> What lay at the end of the fences and canals were desertlands and mountains extremely dangerous to cross without guidance or sufficient water. Therefore, the fences discouraged illegal immigration by exposing undocumented border crossers to the dangers of daytime dehydration and nighttime hypothermia.<sup>68</sup>

The construction of the fence sparked immediate resistance in Mexican border communities. To protect the fence, the governor of Baja California detailed Mexican

---

<sup>66</sup> Letter from the Commissioner to Honorable Jon Phillips on 19 January 1948, file 56084/946, box 9, RG 85, acc 59A2034, NARA.

<sup>67</sup> 20 March 1953 memo from David Snow, Patrol Inspector in Charge, Brownsville, Texas to Fletcher Rawls, Chief Patrol Inspector, McAllen, Texas, "Need for construction of boundary fence and observation towers in vicinity of Brownsville, Texas-Matamoros, Mexico to control illegal traffic," file 56084/946A, box 9, RG 85, acc 59A2034, NARA.

<sup>68</sup> For a review of later fencing efforts and their consequences in Calexico, California, see Wayne Cornelius, "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy," *Population and Development Review* 27 (December 2001): 661–85.

soldiers to patrol and protect the fence “during its erection.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, although the Mexican government consistently demanded protection for Mexican *braceros* from discrimination and abuse by U. S. employers, Mexican border officials helped the U. S. Border Patrol to erect fences designed to reduce illegal immigration by making border crossings more dangerous for undocumented workers.

When the Calexico fence was completed, many migrants found ways to cut through, over and under the border fence. Others, however, became frustrated by the barricades and risked the march around its edges. For example, after being apprehended by the U. S. Border Patrol while trying to get across the border fence, a Mexican deportee reported to the *Los Angeles Times*: “[N]ext time I will cross over in the desert country. When, with companions, I will take a road through the desert sand where there are no people.” He recognized that beyond the fences “it is hard, and, many die on such a road,” but he hoped: “[M]aybe my water bottle will last and I will come to some place like San Bernardino, or to Los Angeles, and become lost there, from la migra.”<sup>70</sup> Many who shared his dream, however, perished along the way. On 4 February 1952, for example, an irrigation district employee discovered five dead Mexican males near Superstition Mountain in the Imperial Valley of California. The bodies were found “near small shrubs with a flax straw water bag, two cans of sardines and two loaves of bread.”<sup>71</sup> Apparently the men had readied themselves for a long trek through the desert, but had underestimated the ravages of the backlands along the U. S.-Mexico border.

Many of those who did not test the dangers of the deserts chose to cross the border’s waterways, such as crossing the All-American Canal in Southern California. As with the Rio Grande in Texas, which was claiming the life of at least one undocumented border crosser each day, the United States Border Patrol and Mexican officers left the All-American relatively unguarded because of the inherent threat it presented to undocumented crossers.<sup>72</sup> On 26 May, 1952, twenty-five-year-old Mario Ramírez stepped into the canal six miles west of Calexico and drowned.<sup>73</sup> Several days later, canal

<sup>69</sup> 1 July 1949 report, “Preliminary Estimate for Lighting of Boundary Fence, Installing Protective Devices and Erection of Observation Towers at Calexico, San Ysidro and Nogales,” file 56084/946A, box 9, RG 85, acc 59A2034, NARA. Also see, 28 November 1952 memo from R.L. Williams to H. Landon regarding “International Fence at Calexico,” file 56084/946A, box 9, RG 85, acc 59A2034, NARA; 27 June 1949 memo from Nick Collaer to W.F. Kelly regarding “Guarding of the International Fence, Calexico,” file 56364/43 sw pt. 1, box 93, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA; 12 July 1949 memo from H.R. Landon to M.H.A. Lindsay, Chief Engineer, ADT Co., file 56084/946A, box 9, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>70</sup> “Mexican Workers Flood Across Line,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 May 1950.

<sup>71</sup> “Bodies of Five Men Believed to be Wetbacks found in Desert,” *Imperial Valley (El Centro, California) Press*, 4 February 1952.

<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of the number of undocumented immigrants dying while crossing the Rio Grande, see *Excelsior (Mexico City)* 7, 8, and 21 July 1949.

<sup>73</sup> “Wetback Drowns Near Calexico,” *Brawley (California) News*, 26 May 1952, folder 6, box 50, Ernesto Galarza Collection at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California (hereafter Galarza Collection).

authorities discovered the battered corpse of another young Mexican male that had been entangled in the head gate of the All-American canal for at least one month.<sup>74</sup> He could have been heading north or south, because Mexican policy denied undocumented immigrants who self-deported the right to use the ports of entry forcing deportees to surreptitiously re-enter Mexico as they had entered the United States.<sup>75</sup>

Cooperatively exploiting the lethality of the border landscape was a creation of a new era of immigration law enforcement in which U. S. and Mexican officers worked together to deter and discourage, and prevent and punish, unsanctioned border crossings by Mexican nationals. Still, undocumented Mexican immigration seemed to grow despite the dangers of illicit border crossings and interior deportations. The number of apprehensions made by the U. S. Border Patrol in the Mexican border region rose from 279,379 in 1949 to 459,289 in 1950 and 501,713 in 1951. Poverty south of the border and relatively high wages north of the border sustained a constant flow of undocumented Mexican immigration. But these statistics do not represent a clear reflection of the overall volume of undocumented immigration because they do not indicate the rising number of "repeat offenders" being apprehended by the Border Patrol. By the late 1940s, on average, one-third of all apprehensions were of "repeat offenders," persons who had previously been deported.<sup>76</sup> Further, the statistics do not reveal the innovations occurring within U. S. Border Patrol practice that enhanced their capacity to apprehend and deport larger numbers of deportees.

In February of 1950, U. S. Border Patrol Inspector Albert Quillin of South Texas launched a new strategy that would soon form the core of U. S. Border Patrol activities. "At 5 am, Tuesday, February 11" 1950, Quillin convened a detail of twelve border patrolmen with "two buses, one plane, one truck, a carryall and . . . nine automobiles" at a "point four miles east of Rio Hondo, Texas."<sup>77</sup> There, the officers set up a miniature immigration station and split into two teams. Each team was given maps of the area and instructions to apprehend as many undocumented immigrants as possible, quickly process them through the temporary immigration station, and then place them on one of the waiting buses that would take deportees directly to the border. That day, about 100 undocumented Mexicans were deported from the Rio Hondo area. The next day, this same detail moved on to Crossroads Gin near Los Fresnos, Texas, and raided farms. By the end of the second day, an additional 561 undocumented Mexicans had been deported. On the third and fourth days, this detail moved into San Benito, Texas, from

---

<sup>74</sup> "Body is found in All American," *Imperial Valley Press*, 1 June 1952, folder 6, box 50, Galarza Collection.

<sup>75</sup> File 545.3/98, box 587, FMAV, AGN.

<sup>76</sup> *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for Fiscal Year ending 1948* (Washington DC, 1948), 24.

<sup>77</sup> 11 February 1950 memo from Al Quillin to Fletcher Rawls, "Activities of this station February 7 through February 10," file 56364/43 sw pt. 2, box 93, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA.



where they deported 398 Mexicans. Altogether, Quillin's detail apprehended over 1,000 undocumented laborers in four days of work. Word quickly spread regarding Quillin's accomplishments and within two weeks his model was being applied throughout South Texas.<sup>78</sup> Soon, Quillin's model was given a name, "Operation Wetback," coordinated with the lifts that deported Mexicans into the interior of Mexico, and introduced to Border Patrol operations throughout California and Texas.<sup>79</sup> By 1952, the "Operation Wetback" model was a well-heeled strategy utilized by most Border Patrol stations throughout the Southwest.<sup>80</sup> For example, at dawn on 30 July 1952, "some 100 Border Patrolmen in trucks, cars equipped with radios, and airplanes, touched off a mass raid in the Russelltown area between Harlingen and Brownsville," Texas.<sup>81</sup> By 8 A.M., the officers had apprehended over 3,000 Mexican nationals. By noon, total apprehensions for the day reached 5,000. The officers quickly processed the Mexicans for deportation at tomato warehouses that had been converted into temporary detention centers and immigration stations. Once processed for deportation, the Border Patrol transported those ready for deportation to the international bridge at Hidalgo. At the bridge, the border patrolmen handed the deportees a note that read: "You have entered the United States illegally and in violation of the laws of your land and also those of the United States. For this reason you are being returned to your homeland."<sup>82</sup> The deportees were then "escorted across the river" and "turned over to Mexican authorities and placed under military guard."<sup>83</sup> Mexican authorities had built a "wire enclosed detention camp" to hold the deportees until they could be placed on trains with armed guards and transported to the interior of Mexico.<sup>84</sup>

Along with increased personnel concentrated in the U. S.-Mexico border region and improved equipment ranging from buses to planes, the "Operation Wetback" model allowed the Border Patrol to boost the number of annual apprehensions. Between 1950 and 1953, U. S. Border Patrol apprehensions almost doubled from 459,289 to 827,440. Although the introduction of the "Operation Wetback" model and the rising number of repeat crossers made the jump in apprehension statistics a poor gauge for the overall volume of undocumented Mexican immigration, the raw increase in the number of

---

<sup>78</sup> Fletcher Rawls letter to Jefe Brady 27 February 1950, file 56364/43 sw pt. 2, box 93, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>79</sup> 2 March 1950, William Whalen, District Director San Antonio to Commissioner Washington DC, File 56364/43 sw pt. 2, box 91, acc 59A2038, NARA

<sup>80</sup> 16 July 1952 memo from J.W. Holland to Congressman Rooney, file 56364/43 sw pt. 2, box 93, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>81</sup> "Raiders Hint Employers to be Prosecuted," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 30 July 1952.

<sup>82</sup> "Wetbacks Warned to Stay in Mexico," *Caller-Times News Service*, n.d. Scrapbook, NBPM.

<sup>83</sup> "Raiders Hint" *Valley Evening Monitor*, 30 July 1952.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



apprehensions of undocumented Mexicans caused many in Mexico and the United States to believe that a crisis existed.<sup>85</sup>

In response to the ever-increasing number of apprehensions, U. S. and Mexican officials intensified their activities during 1953. To compensate for that year's loss of the airlifts, U. S. and Mexican officials agreed to complement the ongoing train-lifts by contracting Mexican ships to boat-lift deportees from Port Isabel, Texas, to Vera Cruz, México. Between 3 September, 1953 and 25 August 1956, U. S. and Mexican officials boat-lifted 49,503 deportees, or almost 2,000 deportees monthly. The boat-lifts operated on the S.S. *Emancipación* and the S.S. *Mercurio*, which transported Mexican bananas to Port Isabel before taking Mexican deportees to the port of Vera Cruz, México.<sup>86</sup> In addition to the expanded capacity of the boat-lifts and continuing train-lifts, U. S. Border Patrol task forces intensified their activities in South Texas. By the end of the year, the U. S. Border Patrol reported apprehending 827,440 Mexican nationals.

For many, the continuing spike in apprehensions along the southern border directly reflected a deepening crisis of unsanctioned border crossings by Mexican nationals and was unrelated to innovations in U. S. and Mexican immigration law enforcement. Another breakdown in Bracero Program negotiations stalled cross-border collaboration in January of 1954, but by spring, U. S. and Mexican officials resumed negotiations to aggressively combat the crisis in undocumented Mexican immigration. In the United States, President Eisenhower appointed retired Army General Swing as the commissioner of the INS. General Swing's appointment was intended to improve the efficiency of immigration law enforcement through militarization of the INS. In Mexico, preparations were made to increase the number of removals to the interior while the Mexican press warned potential migrants of the impending campaign. Officials of the two countries rushed memos and agreements back and forth regarding how they could independently and collaboratively control the flow of undocumented Mexican immigration. In May 1954, officials of each country publicly announced that the U. S. Border Patrol would soon launch Operation Wetback of 1954 as an innovative law enforcement response to the crisis of undocumented Mexican immigration. One month later, U. S. Border Patrol officers erected roadblocks on roads that led to the interior of the United States to prevent undocumented immigrants from escaping apprehension by fleeing inward. On the 17th the officers were organized into dozens of "command units" of twelve men with buses, airplanes, and mobile immigration stations that would

---

<sup>85</sup> For an in-depth critique of Border patrol apprehension statistics, see Thomas J. Espenshade, "Using INS Border Apprehension Data to Measure the Flow of Undocumented Migrants Crossing the U.S. Mexico Frontier," *International Migration Review* 29 (Summer 1995): 545–65.

<sup>86</sup> Testimony of General Swing, Commissioner of the INS, quoted in "General Swing's Little Mexican Girl," *Valley Evening Monitor*, 3 June 1956. The boatlifts returned the largest numbers of deportees to the interior of Mexico, but a riot aboard the S.S. *Mercurio* in August of 1956 resulted in the drowning of five deportees who jumped from the ship. Soon after, the boatlift program was cancelled.

allow them to quickly process undocumented Mexican nationals for deportation.<sup>87</sup> Everywhere they went, the officers were chased and photographed by journalists who had come to witness what Brownell had promised would be a spectacular show of U. S. law enforcement, headed by the newly appointed General Swing. The journalists and U. S. Border Patrol officers, however, halted at the border while Mexican deportees were delivered into the custody of Mexican officers, who forcibly relocated them to “areas in the country [Mexico] where work was plentiful.”<sup>88</sup> For migrants, the process of deportation continued within Mexico as they were placed on the S.S. *Emancipación* or on one of the trains or planes that had been relocating them to far away places for almost a decade.

While General Joseph Swing is generally credited with designing and launching Operation Wetback as an innovative campaign of U. S. immigration law enforcement, the set of practices employed during the summer of 1954 had begun one decade before Swing’s arrival. The focus upon Mexican nationals, mass deportations, removal to the interior of Mexico, and command units were all well-worn tactics within the recent history of migration control along the U. S.-Mexico border.

Despite his lack of innovation, Commissioner Swing declared the summer campaign a success when they reported that 1,089,583 persons had been apprehended by the U. S. Border Patrol during FY 1954.<sup>89</sup> Yet, the over one million deportations recorded for 1954 cannot be attributed to that summer’s program because FY 1954 closed on 30 June 1954, just two weeks into the summer campaign. The large numbers of apprehensions recorded for FY 1954, therefore, were made between 1 July 1953 and 30 June 1954. Apprehensions for FY 1955, which included the largest portion of the summer of 1954 campaign, registered only 254,096 apprehensions.<sup>90</sup> Fewer apprehensions had not been made since 1948, making the law enforcement accomplishments of the summer of 1954 less than they were portrayed to be. Understanding that mass deportations did not accompany the campaign of the summer of 1954, however, does not render the summer of 1954 meaningless. Rather, instead of being a major law enforcement campaign, the summer of 1954 can better be understood as a massive publicity campaign for what had happened the year before and a public claiming of migration control by the U. S. government despite the critical contributions and participation of the Mexican government.

The publicity campaign of 1954 made an impact far beyond the numbers of apprehensions actually accomplished. After 1954, the long and complicated history of

---

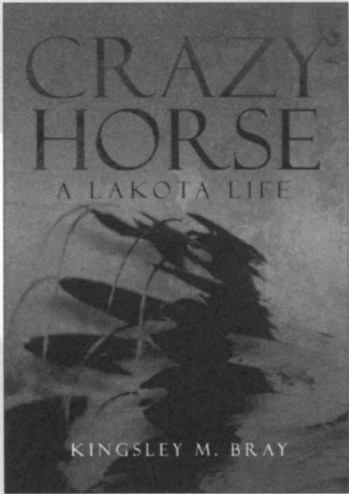
<sup>87</sup> “Highlights of Operation Wetback,” file 56364/43.3, box 94, RG85, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>88</sup> Attorney General announcement, file 56364/45.6, vol. IX, box 104, RG 85, acc 59A2038, NARA.

<sup>89</sup> *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1954* (Washington DC, 1965), 71.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Operation Wetback remained camouflaged behind the public statements and press accounts of that summer. Those statements and accounts tended to limit the story of Operation Wetback to the summer of 1954 and to north of the U.S.-Mexico borderline. This article, however, utilizes U. S. and Mexican sources to retrace the longer history of Operation Wetback and highlight cross-border border dynamics of migration control that the activities and pronouncements of 1954 obscured. What emerges from a critical analysis of the development of Operation Wetback is not the story that Attorney General Brownell hoped to project about the innovation and success of U. S. law enforcement during the summer of 1954. Rather, cross-border research transforms the typically nation-bound and time-bound narrative of Operation Wetback into an unexpected story of evolving binational efforts at migration control. Those binational efforts, such as the collaborative deportations, coordinated raids, and shared surveillance, linked the crimes of unsanctioned exit from Mexico and illicit entry into the United States and extended their consequences across the U. S.-Mexico border. Although much of the cross-border history of Operation Wetback remains lost in what was never written south of the border, expanding and extending the lens applied to the campaign deepens our understanding of the penalties that migrants paid for their crimes of illegal migration when the boundaries of state violence were stitched together by collaborative police practice.



**Crazy Horse**  
**A Lakota Life**  
By Kingsley M. Bray

*Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* corrects older, idealized accounts—and draws on a greater variety of sources than other recent biographies—to expose the real Crazy Horse: not the brash Sioux warrior we have come to expect but a modest, reflective man whose courage was anchored in Lakota piety.

**\$34.95 Cloth** · 978-8061-3785-1 · 528 pages

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS  
800 627 7377 · OUPRESS.COM  
2800 VENTURE DRIVE • NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069