

controversy, and violence against the local citizenry tarnished its reputation and brought condemnation from the local media and business and government leaders. The Goose Creek investigations further highlighted its record of violence. Outrageous acts, such as recruiting police officers, encountered the resistance of a mayor determined to prevent the extension of the secret order's tentacles.

The Klan's inability to assert itself in the 1922 mayoral and 1924 school board races showed that its focus was too narrow to attract broad support. Klansmen simply could not impose their will on an increasingly resistant and distrustful community. The litigation between the Klan and Kimbro revealed a badly split organization and brought more unfavorable publicity. In the *Houston Post-Dispatch*, for example, the trial was a front-page item for twenty days between March 3 and 31, 1925.

The Ku Klux Klan failed because of its contradictions. No group, including the Klan, which tried to conceal its members under robes and met secretly at night in fields, could hope to survive and grow in the public eye. Controversy and violence divided the organization while its leaders sought to broaden its following. Guardians against change, the group flourished briefly so long as rapid change seemed threatening to many Houstonians. Yet, as that instability lessened and the guardians themselves were perceived as a greater threat than those they guarded against, the Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County became just one more narrow issue group whose time had come and gone.

## “In the Shadow of Uncertainty”: Texas Mexicans and Repatriation in Houston During the Great Depression

*Marilyn D. Rhinehart and Thomas H. Kreneck*

In 1931, Victoriano Rodriguez, a Mexican national living in Galveston, Texas, wrote his stepmother Juana Jaurequi in Mexico: “We are worried about what is happening to us here in the United States, that they [Americans] want to throw us by force back to our native land for the simple reason they do not want us to be here.”<sup>1</sup> In an earlier letter to her he wrote, “It seems that they have intentions of refusing to give work to Mexicans, and you will see so many people living in misery that it scares you. I believe the day is not far away when you will have us there.”<sup>2</sup>

Rodriguez's observations were neither unrealistic nor singular. As more and more Americans were caught up in the Depression, they felt threatened by the possibility of foreigners holding jobs or on relief, to the detriment of the native-born. A campaign began at both national and local levels to deport illegal aliens and to promote and facilitate voluntary repatriation for legal alien residents. These campaigns and the nativist sentiments accompanying them were primarily aimed at the large Mexican population resident in this country at the time, and between 1929 and 1939 as many as 500,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans departed the United States.<sup>3</sup> Most were legal residents who considered the United States a permanent home, although their affection for their native land had not diminished. Some repatriated by their own means; some with the aid of local relief organizations, the Mexican govern-

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<sup>1</sup>Victoriano Rodriguez to Juana Jaurequi, February 5, 1931, Rodriguez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, November 7, 1930.

<sup>3</sup>Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Precursors, 1929-1939* (Tucson, 1974), 2.

ment, and Mexican community organizations; and some at the behest and expense of the United States government. By whatever means they left, all shared the fear and uncertainty of a future clouded by economic crisis, hostility in their adopted homeland, and dislocation. From Houston, at least two thousand persons were repatriated in the early 1930s. The experience of these Mexican Houstonians typifies what occurred in urban centers elsewhere in the state and the nation.

In the early twentieth century, the hope of economic opportunities in the United States, Mexico's political and economic instability, and the existence of newly constructed railroad lines linking the two countries combined to stimulate Mexican migration north across the border. On this side, lax enforcement of the 1917 immigration law and the need for labor during World War I tacitly encouraged this migration.<sup>4</sup> In Houston jobs were available along the Ship Channel and in local railroad yards. In 1920 the census recorded six thousand people of Mexican descent in Houston, and by 1930 their numbers had grown to fourteen thousand out of a total city population of three hundred thousand.<sup>5</sup> However, stringent enforcement of the immigration laws passed in 1924 and 1929 had considerably reduced Mexican migration to the United States by the early 1930s.<sup>6</sup> At a personal level, the impact of the government's change in policy is expressed in a June 1930 letter which Rodriguez sent to his relatives in Mexico concerning the possibility of a visit to them. "[R]ight now," he wrote, "one can't leave the United States because, did you know the problem is not leaving but coming back."<sup>7</sup> Thus, even before Americans had felt the full effects of the Depression, restriction of Mexican immigration was apparent. As unemployment soared, its effect was to heighten public attention directed at aliens resident in the United States, particularly those from Mexico.

Reports from angry American citizens, convinced that competition from alien jobholders threatened Americans' economic security, filled 1931 Congressional hearings on the jobless situation and on the advisability of more stringent immigration restrictions. A cotton buyer in Houston testified that

<sup>4</sup>F. Arturo Rosales, "Mexicans in Houston: The Struggle to Survive, 1908-1975," *The Houston Review* 3 (Summer 1981): 224-227, 231; Hoffman, 2, 11, 26, 30; Ricardo Romo, "Responses to Mexican Immigration, 1910-1930," *Aztlan* (1975): 177, 180-183; Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut, 1976), 12.

<sup>5</sup>Rosales, 231; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, 1015.

<sup>6</sup>Hoffman, 30-33; Robert N. McLean, "Tightening the Mexican Border," *Survey* 64 (April 1, 1930): 29; Robert N. McLean, "Goodbye, Vicente!" *Survey* 66 (May 1, 1931): 195; Reisler, 231; see immigration statistics in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 107, and U.S. Department of Labor, *Annual Reports of the Commissioner General of Immigration, 1925-1931*, for specific references to Mexican immigration and its decline.

<sup>7</sup>Rodriguez to Jaurequi, June 17, 1930, Rodriguez Family Collection.

"a white man would not and could not live under the same conditions of the average Mexican laborer. I have been in some sections of the State [Texas] where the Mexican farm tenant is displacing the native-born tenant very rapidly." Another Houstonian contended, "Far-sighted Americans can never allow ill-educated groups to pollute our already polyglot streams with the lowest types of Central Americans."<sup>8</sup>

Texas Mexicans<sup>9</sup> could not escape the consequences of such nativist attitudes. They not only faced an economic crisis which was often worse than that of many native-born Americans, since employers usually laid off aliens first, but also the hostility of xenophobes and the fear of forced relocation.<sup>10</sup> Many, whether they were laborers out of work or small businessmen who had saved money only to lose it during the economic downturn, ultimately contemplated a return to Mexico as their only alternative.<sup>11</sup> Rodriguez expressed this common sentiment in a November 1931 letter: "many people are returning to Mexico because they can't find anything to do and jobs are scarce . . . I had a small fortune that I managed to gather during the bonanza but now in these bad times all is finished."<sup>12</sup> In another 1931 letter he described the worsening situation in the Galveston area to his stepmother, stating with exasperation that "only lamentation is heard from the people, [saying] that if God, Our Lord, does not remedy [our situation], I don't know what shall become of us."<sup>13</sup>

When the Depression actually struck, Houston tried its best to ignore it. At first the city did not suffer the same crippling effects experienced by other areas in the nation, largely due to its shipping and oil industries. But by 1930 the city began to display symptoms of economic malaise, and as overwhelmed relief agencies faltered, the symptoms worsened. Voluntary agencies such as the Community Chest, supplemented by the sparingly funded city Social Service Bureau, were forced to assume almost all responsibility for indigent Houstonians.<sup>14</sup> In December 1931, in response to a letter from United States

<sup>8</sup>*Congressional Record*, 71 Congress, 3 Session, 74 (1931): 4385.

<sup>9</sup>R. Reynolds McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation During the Great Depression," (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1982) uses the term "Texas Mexican" to describe Mexicans and Mexican Americans residing in Texas.

<sup>10</sup>Hoffman, 35.

<sup>11</sup>Augustin Villagomez, interview with Thomas H. Kreneck, February 24, 1983, Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>12</sup>Rodriguez to Jaurequi, November 6, 1931, Rodriguez Family Collection.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, undated (circa 1931).

<sup>14</sup>William Edward Montgomery, "The Depression in Houston During the Hoover Era, 1929-1932" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1966), 12, 27, 137, 141, 143; Donald Wayne Whisenhunt, "Texas in the Depression, 1929-1933: A Study of Public Reaction" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1966), 9-10.

Senator Robert La Follette who was collecting information on local relief efforts across the country, Houston Mayor Walter Monteith explained that unemployment in the city had risen from 670 families in 1929 to 789 in 1930 and to 2,231 in 1931; yet the city appropriated no funds for unemployment relief.<sup>15</sup> The Texas Legislature further complicated local relief efforts, refusing to appropriate general revenue funds for relief purposes and failing in the early years of the Depression to pass the required constitutional amendment which would have enabled issuance of bonds to supplement local relief agency funds.<sup>16</sup> It is little wonder that by 1932 Community Chest funds in Houston had been stretched to their limit; disbursements of \$2,238 in 1929 rose to \$8,883 by 1931.<sup>17</sup> By 1933 the situation approached a critical point. A May 8, 1933, article in the *Houston Chronicle* warned that local relief funds could last only a few more days without supplementation.<sup>18</sup> The deepening of the Depression and the inability of private charity to support the growing number of the unemployed cast an ominous shadow on all Houstonians, but for the minority population the effects were even more dramatic since relief funds generally went to American citizens.

Mayor Monteith reported to Senator La Follette that the "colored and Mexican unemployed people have increased in numbers since December 1 [1931]; they are coming in from the cotton fields and yard work."<sup>19</sup> To reduce the demand placed by such transients on employment opportunities, a Home Labor Association of Houston and Harris County formed in the fall of 1931 to lobby for passage of local ordinances limiting employment and contracts on public works projects to individuals who had resided in Houston for at least six months.<sup>20</sup> The organization and its lobbying work paralleled actions on the statewide level. Civil Works Administration directors in Texas, who established rules for public works projects, barred aliens from working on them, just as alien residents had been restricted in 1932 from employment on jobs funded by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Enabling legislation also restricted noncitizens from working on local Works Progress Administration jobs, with 2,700 Mexicans removed from the agency's rolls in Houston as late as 1937. Additionally, the Texas House and Senate approved a joint resolution suggesting that the work be given to local contractors and local labor on all public works projects.<sup>21</sup> On October 3, 1931, the *Houston Post-*

<sup>15</sup>*Congressional Record*, 72 Congress, 1 Session, 75 (1932): 3238.

<sup>16</sup>McKay, 230; Whisenhunt, 9-10.

<sup>17</sup>*Congressional Record*, 72 Congress, 1 Session, 75 (1932): 3238.

<sup>18</sup>*Houston Chronicle*, May 8, 1933.

<sup>19</sup>*Congressional Record*, 72 Congress, 1 Session, 75 (1932): 3238.

<sup>20</sup>*Houston Post-Dispatch*, October 1, 2, 3, 1931.

<sup>21</sup>McKay, 233-234, 238, 243-245.

*Dispatch* reported that Houston City Council had approved such a "home labor clause."<sup>22</sup> Thus, local relief supervisors could deny public employment to Mexican residents.

These and other efforts to deny public assistance to Houston's Mexican population apparently worked. In October 1931 the city of Houston instituted a work relief program at the Hemphaw Building where for two or three hours' work one could receive meals and a place to sleep. On the first day of its operation, 150 Houstonians registered, but according to its director, "not a single one was a Mexican."<sup>23</sup> In the same month a newspaper report concluded that since only 3 Mexicans out of 104 families applied for rations, "the Mexicans . . . evidently are helping to take care of each other."<sup>24</sup> According to a consular report, by 1932 those indigent *Mexicanos* in the city who applied for aid were being denied work relief and received only limited amounts of food and used clothing. Few Mexican Houstonians expected aid in such a hostile climate, and relief needs often went unreported for fear of retaliation through possible deportation.<sup>25</sup>

Periodic immigration raids occurred at private construction job sites where companies hired "Mexican" labor. In 1931 alone, such raids resulted in 152 deportations from Houston.<sup>26</sup> Although an exact and complete accounting of the number of Mexican deportations from the Houston-Galveston area during the Depression years has yet to be made, even a cursory examination of United States district court records in Immigration and Naturalization Service files spanning the years 1929 to 1933 reveals a considerable number of imprisonment and deportation actions in Houston and Galveston district courts against Mexicans arrested for violation of the 1929 immigration act.<sup>27</sup> In a February 1931 letter, Eugene R. Dilworth, Inspector in Charge of the Immigration Service office in Houston explained to the Commissioner General of Immigration, Harry Hull, that the work in the Houston office had "more than quadrupled" since 1927 and requested larger accommodations.<sup>28</sup> In December 1931 Commissioner General Hull revised an earlier request for 2,500 square feet of floor space for the Immigration Service at the downtown post office building in Houston upward to 3,060 square feet due to "increased

<sup>22</sup>*Houston Post-Dispatch*, October 3, 1931.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, October 16, 1931.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, October 21, 1931.

<sup>25</sup>Whisenhunt, 184; McKay, 251-252.

<sup>26</sup>Hoffman, 72.

<sup>27</sup>File #55640/535, Immigration and Naturalization Service Records, Record Group 85, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>28</sup>Eugene R. Dilworth to Commissioner General of Immigration, February 7, 1931, File #55652-917, Immigration and Naturalization Service Records, Record Group 85.



deportation activities" in the city.<sup>29</sup> Although less dramatic than Immigration Service raids in South Texas in 1928 and in Los Angeles in 1931, the government's activity around Houston nevertheless had a chilling effect on Mexican aliens here.<sup>30</sup>

In such an atmosphere of widespread deportation, many feared that the legality of their presence here would be ignored. In 1930 Rodriguez wrote his stepmother about the raids and the rumors which spread in their aftermath: "It seems like the American Gentlemen want to run us off from their country. It has become so alarming because they have made many Mexicans return to Mexico whether they have passports or not; some by force because they entered the country illegally and others for lack of jobs."<sup>31</sup> One Houstonian of Mexican heritage recalled the fears of those times. His uncle, who had immigrated from Spain to settle with the Houston branch of the family, was advised by his employer to maintain a low profile (assisted by his light complexion) if and when the Immigration Bureau officials checked papers. Even though he clearly held legal residence here, his Spanish surname would place him in an awkward situation regardless of his non-Mexican nativity and the legality of his domicile in the United States. As a result of such experiences he anglicized his surname for the rest of his life.<sup>32</sup>

In the midst of the economic crisis, Houston's Mexican *colonia* largely cared for its own. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in the Second Ward, the largest Mexican neighborhood in Houston, served many in need. As economic conditions in Houston worsened, the Sisters of Divine Providence who operated the school at our Lady of Guadalupe fed nearly one hundred children twice a day, their efforts supplemented by donations from local companies.<sup>33</sup> The Houston *Chronicle* described their work with an interesting insight into the Texas Mexican community's adaptation to adversity: "The dire need of a Mexican family is not apparent . . . They are a long suffering people, greatly misunderstood. It hurts them to have to call for outside help, and they will do it only as a last resort. The Mexicans," the article concluded, "are a proud and sensitive people."<sup>34</sup> The Methodist Church, through its Women's Board of Missions and Wesley House, also provided social services

<sup>29</sup>Harry E. Hull to Chief Clerk, Department of Labor, December 12, 1931, File #55652/917, Immigration and Naturalization Service Records, Record Group 85.

<sup>30</sup>McKay, 107.

<sup>31</sup>Rodriguez to Jaurequi, November 7, 1930, Rodriguez Family Collection.

<sup>32</sup>Jose J. Torres, conversation with Thomas E. Kreneck, February 16, 1983, Houston.

<sup>33</sup>Sister Mary Paul Valdez, *The History of the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence* (n.p., 1978), 19-20.

<sup>34</sup>Houston *Chronicle*, September 11, 1932.

to the needy within Houston's Mexican population.<sup>35</sup>

Rusk Settlement House, also located in the Second Ward, had offered substantial assistance to the *Mexicano* population since its establishment early in the century. It was funded by the city Social Service Bureau and by the Community Chest, and like similar relief organizations across Texas its finances proved inadequate when the Depression deepened. The Mexican community, however, rallied to its support. When the Social Service Bureau announced budget cuts for 1932, a committee of residents promised to locate sixty-five individuals in the community to contribute one dollar a month for eight months to keep the children's worker on staff. Local Mexican residents frequently provided donations to help keep the Rusk Settlement House program afloat. Among its other activities, in 1932 and 1933 Rusk Settlement House would facilitate the repatriation of at least one hundred Mexicans who had been on extended relief.<sup>36</sup>

Although Houston newspapers carried little information on the community's Mexican population, in the early 1930s they printed periodic reports of repatriation from other parts of the country. In the same edition of the Houston *Post-Dispatch* which reported passage of the home labor clause an article headlined "500 Mexicans Leave U.S. for Native Land" also appeared. "It is a daily occurrence," the news item stated, "to see a number of wagons containing the repatriating Mexicans' worldly goods waiting on the American side at any of the bridges while their papers are being put in order."<sup>37</sup> Two days before, another article had reported "4000 Mexicans to Quit Texas," referring to the announcement that 800 families had left Laredo to go to the Don Martin Irrigation Project in Mexico with the aid of the Mexican government.<sup>38</sup> Other articles in the *Post-Dispatch* that month focused on the perceived advantages of Mexican repatriation. "The departure of the Mexican eases the unemployment situation in Southern California perceptibly, and simplifies the relief problem no little," one source contended. Another article stated that "there is room only for a limited number of such [Mexican] laborers, and the influx in recent years has been too great." And in the editorial section, the paper struck another chord. "If Mexican immigration is checked, Mexican illiteracy will decline in Texas."<sup>39</sup> Although these articles make no direct reference to Mexicans in Houston, they reflect an interest in

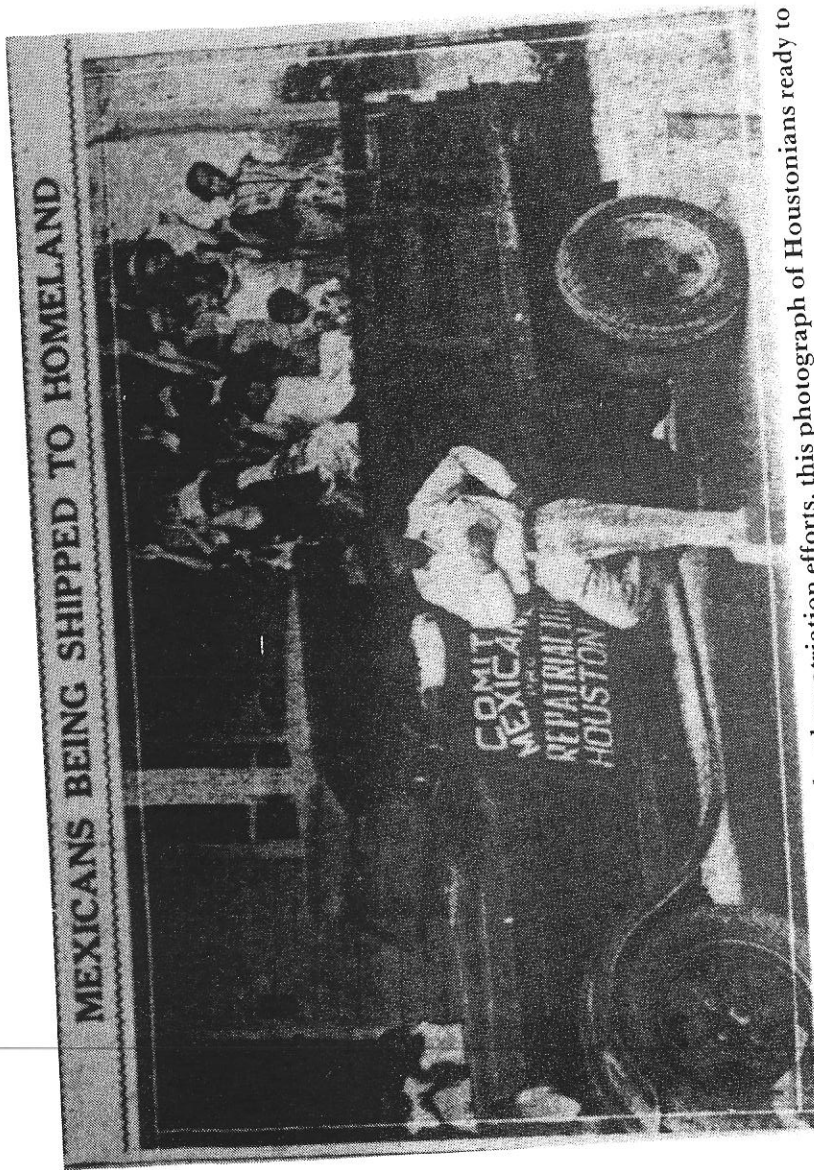
<sup>35</sup>Mrs. Maurice Faubion, conversation with Marilyn D. Rhinehart, February 21, 1983, Houston.

<sup>36</sup>Connie S. Tsanoff, *Neighborhood Doorways* (Houston, 1958), 2, 21, 24, 26.

<sup>37</sup>Houston *Post-Dispatch*, October 3, 1931.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, October 1, 1931.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, October 12, 1931.



Accompanying an article on local repatriation efforts, this photograph of Houstonians ready to return to Mexico appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* on May 3, 1932.

repatriation and immigration restriction as solutions to a number of problems deemed significant enough to report to local readers. In this climate of opinion, it is little wonder that a repatriation movement appeared in the city.

Mexican consul reports indicated that in the first eleven months of 1930, 333 families recorded their departures from Houston to return to Mexico. The American consul at Nuevo Laredo reported 895 persons who had departed from Houston in the last six months of 1930 alone. In January 1931 Daniel Garza, the Mexican consul in Houston, organized efforts to return a number of local residents to their homeland. Promising them government land, an attractive inducement to those facing economic ruin in the United States, Garza aided the resettlement of about fifty families to the Don Martin Irrigation Project. Local Mexican mutual aid societies helped to fund this effort.<sup>40</sup> In May 1932 the *Houston Chronicle* printed a photograph of a truck, labeled on its side "Comite Mexicano Pro-Repatriacion Houston," ready for departure. The article described the activities of a committee headed by Bartolome Casas, a Houston resident, in assisting the returnees by soliciting donations to transport them to the border where the Mexican government would assume responsibility for them. This particular trip apparently represented the third in a series of repatriations undertaken by the committee, whose name is oddly translated in the article as the Mexican Rehabilitation Committee. Fifty Mexican Houstonians were reported as having returned to Mexico already under its auspices. "Shipments are being made from the Rusk Settlement," the article concluded, "as often as they can be financed by the committee in charge."<sup>41</sup>

In June 1933 the *Houston Chronicle* reported yet another organized repatriation effort, which involved transporting thirty-two participants from the Rusk Settlement House to Mexico. The agency's director, Miss Nollie Bailey, explained that one family which departed had nine members, another seven, and both had been on public support for the past two years. All were to travel to Laredo where the Mexican government would assume charge of the participants, who had been required to sign an affidavit that they would remain "a permanent resident of the republic."<sup>42</sup> Houston residents also recalled that in the late 1930s Mexican officials spoke in community centers and in individual households to encourage repatriation with the promise of government land. Ramon Beteta, Under Secretary of Foreign Relations in the Lazaro Cardenas Administration, visited the United States in April 1939,

<sup>40</sup>Mc Kay, 324.

<sup>41</sup>*Houston Chronicle*, May 3, 1932.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, June 25, 1933.

concentrating most of his time in Texas to recruit Mexicans there to emigrate. The inducements he held out were offers of land, the possibility of extra wages for road and sanitation work in the area, and low-interest loans for homes, livestock, and other requirements for securing a living. In Houston Beteta visited people in their homes, spoke at public meetings, and made arrangements with the Mexican consul for the departure of interested parties and the shipping of their household goods. At the end of May 1939 over 150 persons from the surrounding area left Houston for the government colony.<sup>43</sup>

Repatriation and deportation figures gleaned from R. Reynolds McKay's work on Texas Mexican repatriation during the Depression, along with comments in interviews conducted by the Houston Metropolitan Research Center with Mexican repatriates who returned to the city, suggest that at least two thousand Mexican residents of Houston, or approximately fifteen percent of the city's Mexican community in 1930, left in the early Depression years.<sup>44</sup> The paucity of local records showing actual numbers of departees frustrates any attempt to determine an exact figure, but there is no doubt that such departures were a part of everyday life for the Houston *colonia* during the Depression.

Newspaper accounts usually eschewed sentiment in their reports of repatriation, ignoring the trauma of such a move and typically noting, as the Houston *Post-Dispatch* did in October 1931, that "although impoverished and residents of the United States for many years, the repatriates appeared to be happy as they sought again the land of their fathers."<sup>45</sup> The Houston *Chronicle* article on the June 1933 "shipments," however, addressed indirectly the problems which repatriation exposed and often exacerbated. The "pathetic" nature of the repatriation activity, Miss Bailey told the *Chronicle* reporter, could be seen in the "farewell of a mother of five children who was born in the United States and has never been to Mexico. She consented to go with her family to the home of the parents of her husband in Guadalajara."<sup>46</sup> The trauma and distress of such relocations afflicted not only Mexicans but also American citizens of Mexican ancestry, particularly American-born children who constituted a preponderant number of minors accompanying Mexican parents to their homeland.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Mrs. Mary Villagomez, conversation with Thomas H. Kreneck, February 10, 1983, Houston.

<sup>44</sup>*Fifteenth Census*, 1015.

<sup>45</sup>Houston *Post-Dispatch*, October 20, 1931.

<sup>46</sup>Houston *Chronicle*, June 25, 1933.

<sup>47</sup>Juan Carrion, interview with Thomas H. Kreneck, March 17, 1983, Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; Villagomez interview; Mrs. Rachel Tamayo, interview with Thomas H. Kreneck and Marilyn D. Rhinehart, April 6, 1983, Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Interviews with participants in the repatriation process in the Houston area indicate that individual, "voluntary" repatriation was the most typical experience of those who left the city between 1929 and 1931, when the movement peaked across the nation. These early repatriates from Houston generally left without outside aid or direct pressure but in response to economic failure or the fear of it and in some cases on promises of government aid in Mexico. Many were property owners who had been in the United States for more than ten years; they departed for villages and towns where relatives or the prospect of land and employment offered security. To fund their trips, repatriates usually sold everything they could not transport and used any means available to return.<sup>48</sup> One Houston resident claimed that his cousin, who had entered the United States illegally, allowed immigration officials to catch him because he could not afford the trip back.<sup>49</sup> Deportation, however, meant no chance to reenter the United States, a condition few welcomed. One man used two railroad passes, belonging to a friend who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, and gave a false identity for himself and his wife to gain free passage.<sup>50</sup> Others left in trucks and autos, old or newly purchased through the sale of their personal goods.<sup>51</sup>

Although many families left together or with friends, the separation of families also occurred. A young brother and sister who lived with family friends in Houston after their mother's death faced a lengthy isolation from their father and brothers when the family with whom they lived repatriated. Ten years later the family was finally reunited in the United States.<sup>52</sup> After residing in Mexico for fifteen years with her repatriated family, another young woman, born in Houston of Mexican parents, returned at the urging of longtime family friends but without her Mexican-born child whom she feared would not be allowed in the United States. Complicating her own return was her parents' failure to register her birth in Houston, a not uncommon situation which required her friends here to secure an affidavit from godparents attesting to her American citizenship.<sup>53</sup> Similar complications often plagued American-born children of Mexican parents when they sought to return to the United States (as many did), necessitating searches through church records for baptism certificates or legal testimony from family friends regarding the birth. Many young, American-born children of repatriates lost their fluency in English while in Mexico and, due to adverse economic

<sup>48</sup>Tamayo interview.

<sup>49</sup>J. Y. Casas, conversation with Marilyn D. Rhinehart, February 29, 1983, Houston.

<sup>50</sup>Villagomez interview.

<sup>51</sup>Carrion interview; Tamayo interview.

<sup>52</sup>Carrion interview.

<sup>53</sup>Tamayo interview.



conditions or limited opportunities, received little formal education there.<sup>54</sup> These Mexican-American children also had the greatest difficulty adjusting to their new setting.<sup>55</sup> One repatriate remembered that his children, most of whom had been born in Houston, cried much of the time the family resided in Mexico, in particular in the evening when, without electricity, the house was dark.<sup>56</sup> Another repatriate, who returned with her family to a village in Mexico, recalled that she and the other American-born children longed for movie houses, parks, and other recreational features of American life which they had taken for granted in the United States but were unavailable where they relocated.<sup>57</sup> If the family remained in Mexico for some time, such children often faced a lengthy adjustment as "foreigners in their parents' homeland," sometimes living in a culture apart from their Mexican-born siblings.<sup>58</sup>

For many repatriates, the stay in Mexico was short-lived. Approximately one-third returned to the United States before 1930.<sup>59</sup> Texas Mexicans who repatriated recounted many stories of disappointment. A depressed Mexican economy proved incapable of coping successfully with the repatriation of 500,000 citizens, and promises of government aid did not always materialize. Poor wages, inadequate living arrangements, and unsuccessful agricultural ventures frustrated repatriates.<sup>60</sup> The experience of several hundred Texas Mexicans from the Houston area who settled in the village of Cameron, Nuevo Leon (near Nuevo Laredo) provides a good example of the many tribulations of the transplanted families. Arid, rocky land made cotton farming there quite difficult, and a "big storm" which swamped the village in the late 1930s left the soil and water salty, a condition which doomed it. While most residents subsequently departed for the Eighteenth of March government colony and better opportunity, those who remained were left with "nothing... but mesquite, cactus, and snakes."<sup>61</sup> Another family returned to Houston after only three unhappy months in Mexico, with just enough money to pay for their return trip. Having received visas to enter the United States in 1924, "like you buy a ticket for the picture show," they encountered little difficulty in returning to the United States. In their case, a border patrol officer made it

<sup>54</sup>Tamayo interview; Carrion interview.

<sup>55</sup>Reisler, 232.

<sup>56</sup>Villagomez interview.

<sup>57</sup>Tamayo interview.

<sup>58</sup>Rev. Absalom Gamez, conversation with Marilyn D. Rhinehart, February 21, 1983, Houston.

<sup>59</sup>Hoffman, 233.

<sup>60</sup>Carrion interview; Villagomez interview; Lawrence A. Cardosa, *Mexican Emigration to the United States 1897-1931: Socio-Economic Patterns* (Tucson, 1980), 150-151.

<sup>61</sup>Carrion interview.

possible for them to reenter with ease. As they left the United States, carrying all their belongings with them, he followed them to the border insisting that they have their visas stamped in case they should want to return. This family was very fortunate; existing evidence suggests that immigration officials more often treated the repatriates poorly.<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Houston repatriates further indicate that the majority who left probably returned to the United States. Of the approximately 250,000 Texas Mexicans who left this country, however, over 150,000 remained in Mexico—satisfied with life there, disappointed with their experience in the United States, or reunited with family members.<sup>63</sup>

Those repatriates who returned to Houston and recounted their experiences left no doubt of the traumatic impact of the event on their lives. Afraid, uncertain of their future, panic-stricken at the idea of unemployment and reliance on relief in a city which denied them equal access to public aid even if they overcame their pride to ask for it, these individuals hoped for work and security in a homeland which promised but often could not provide new opportunities. Altogether it was a time in their lives recalled with bitterness. As one repatriate remarked, it "never should have happened."<sup>64</sup>

Although Victoriano Rodriguez did not repatriate, perhaps hoping for better times and hesitant to leave, his letters in the 1930s reveal both the hopes and disappointments of Mexicans living in the United States during the Depression and help us to understand the personal struggle that the decision to repatriate must have involved. Early in 1933 he wrote: "All my sons and daughters are very big now and I, well, I am very old but I still have the desire to return to my country. Sometimes I feel like returning to my beloved Mexico, but I hear so much that I lose the will and I prefer to remain around here."<sup>65</sup> For nearly 500,000 Mexicans, half of them from Texas and including several thousand from the Houston area, preference succumbed to necessity in the wake of economic difficulty and Americans' hostility, leaving no apparent alternative but to migrate southward.

<sup>62</sup>Villagomez interview; McKay, 130-131, 133, 141, 146.

<sup>63</sup>Hoffman, 72; McKay; Paul S. Taylor says 49.7 percent of the repatriates came from Texas. Paul S. Taylor, "Migration Statistics," *Mexican Labor in the United States*, Vol. II (Berkeley, 1934), 30.

<sup>64</sup>Carrion interview.

<sup>65</sup>Rodriguez to Jaurequi, January 28, 1933, Rodriguez Family Collection.