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The Washington Post

The time a president deported 1 million Mexican Americans for supposedly stealing U.S. jobs

By Diane Bernard

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Relatives and friends wave goodbye to a train carrying 1,500 people being expelled from Los Angeles to Mexico on Aug. 20, 1931. (N.Y. Daily News archive/Getty Images)

On Feb. 26, 1931, a sunny Sunday in Los Angeles, hundreds gathered for an afternoon of relaxation in La Placita park in the heart of the city's Mexican community.

Suddenly, a large group of plainclothes officers armed with guns and batons entered the park. Two officers were posted at each entrance to La Placita so that no one could leave. Dozens of flatbed trucks circled the park's perimeter.

Officers rounded up all the people with brown skin, said Joseph Dunn, a former Democratic state senator from California, who researched this forgotten episode of U.S. history.

Panic swept through the crowd. About 400 park patrons were lined up and asked to show proof of legal entry and citizenship of the United States.

The Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who could not produce proper documentation were detained. Then, some were put on the trucks and sent to the city's main railroad station, Dunn said.

Once there, they were ordered onto previously chartered trains and taken deep into Mexico, according to Dunn.

The raid came at the height of the Great Depression and on the heels of President Herbert Hoover's announcement of a national program of "American jobs for real Americans" — code words for " 'getting rid of Mexicans,' who weren't considered 'real' Americans," said Dunn, whose staff spent three years delving into federal, state and local records in the United States and Mexico to document this little-known tragedy of the Latino experience in the United States.

'Cheap slaves': Trump, immigration and the ugly history of the Chinese Exclusion Act

The program, implemented by Hoover's secretary of labor, William Doak, included passing local laws forbidding government employment of anyone of Mexican descent, even legal permanent residents and U.S. citizens. Major companies, including Ford, U.S. Steel and the Southern Pacific Railroad, colluded with the government by telling Mexicans they would be better off with their own people, laying off thousands.



Migrant Mexican children in a camp during harvest in Nipomo, Calif. (Library of Congress)

The Hoover administration began reimbursing localities for enacting his program. Los Angeles authorities had planned the raid at La Placita as a scare tactic to motivate the population to return to their motherland, even though many of them were born in the United States. The Los Angeles City Council sent memos to the county's board of supervisors advising it to stop the illegal deportations, Dunn said. "The board got tired of the memos and wrote back to the city council, 'This isn't about constitutional validity. It's about the color of their skin,' " said Dunn, who has boxes of documents detailing such events.

Fear swept Mexican communities nationwide throughout the early 1930s as local law enforcement rounded up people in parks, hospitals, markets and social clubs, crammed them onto chartered trains and deposited them across the border.

"Around the country, Mexicans were scapegoated for the bad economy and became victims of cruel dilemmas," said Francisco Balderrama, professor emeritus of history and Chicano studies at California State University at Los Angeles and a co-author of "[Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s](#)," a book based on oral histories and archival research.

In addition to claiming that Mexican deportations would create more jobs, officials also said that Mexicans were overwhelming welfare offices and draining charities set up for the needy during a time of economic calamity. Yet, during the early years of the Depression, Mexicans "comprised less than 10 percent of the relief recipients across the country," according to "Decade of Betrayal." Hoover's approach is echoed in the Trump administration's immigration policies. "There's no question in the minds of many that Trump's zero-tolerance policy and increased ICE raids has strains of what occurred to Mexicans in the 1930s," Dunn said.

['Utter chaos': ICE arrests 114 workers in immigration raid at Ohio gardening company](#)

But the difference between the two presidents' approaches to deportations lies in Hoover's use of the term "repatriation," Balderrama said. The word suggests a voluntary return to your birthplace, and Mexican repatriation was viewed as a humanitarian gesture by the administration and the public, Dunn said.

A family of Mexican migrants on the road with tire trouble in California in 1936. (Library of Congress)
"In my investigation, I found that what was called repatriation was actually a coverup and a case of unconstitutional deportation because the majority of Mexicans who were deported were born and raised in the United States," Dunn said.

Dunn's research shows that about 1.8 million Mexicans were deported during the 1930s. Of that number, about 60 percent were U.S. citizens.

Elena Herrada, an activist who has compiled oral histories of Mexicans who were deported, said her father was a toddler when he and his family were forced to go to Mexico in 1930. Herrada's aunt said the trip to Mexico was dangerous. "Everybody knew Mexicans were leaving, so robberies on the roads were common," Herrada said.

As was the case for many Mexicans who were coerced into leaving, the government gave the Herrada family provisions of food for three days. But the trip took 30 days because they couldn't drive at night. They would hide their car, which was loaded with possessions, after sunset to avoid being robbed. For children, most of whom were born in the United States, the trip and relocation to Mexico was especially traumatizing. Leaving the only country they'd known to go to an unfamiliar, rural and poor place where no one spoke English left a mark on Christine Valenciana's mother, Emilia Castañeda. Valenciana, associate professor emeritus at California State University at Fullerton, said her mother wasn't used to not having indoor plumbing, was ostracized at school in Mexico for not speaking Spanish, and suffered from a lack of medical and dental care.

"My mother never got a proper education," Valenciana said. "She lived in Mexico for nine miserable years."

Finally, when Emilia turned 17, her godmother found her birth certificate, which was needed to reenter the United States, and sent her money to return. Emilia had always considered Los Angeles her home and was anxious to go back. But she wasn't able to resume her schooling because her English had faded over the years.

With so many Mexicans and Mexican Americans forced to leave the country, there were no voices at the time protesting this mass removal, Balderrama said. Trade unions and other groups were all in favor of saving jobs for whites in the United States.

The famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who was in the United States painting his "Detroit Industry Frescos" during the early 1930s, helped raise money for deportees and worked to obtain humane treatment for compatriots from welfare authorities, according to "Decade of Betrayal." But, like many, he was sold on the idea that repatriation was a positive action instead of a violent disruption with lifelong effects.

"At least today we can say things have gotten better in terms of opposition to immigration policies," Balderrama said.

"But I can see us slipping down this same path with Trump's approach," said Dunn. "Democracy is fragile."

The deportations continued well into the 1930s, even after Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in January 1933. Roosevelt never officially revoked the "American jobs for real Americans" campaign, but by 1933 it was being carried out solely by local governments that acted on their own and his administration did nothing to stop them.

"It just faded away by the end of the 1930s and then World War II brought jobs back," so the scapegoating of Mexicans eased up, Dunn said.

In 2005, Dunn put forward legislation in the California statehouse to apologize for the government's treatment of Mexicans during the Depression. The Apology Act became official on Jan. 1, 2006, expressing regret for the illegal deportations. The law also included installing a memorial where the raid on La Placita took place in Los Angeles. In 2013, California also passed a law requiring that this lost history be taught in the state's public schools.

"We all know about the internment of 145,000 Japanese during World War II," Dunn said. "But 1.8 million Mexican deportees dwarfs that size, and most people know nothing about this topic." Dunn says the Apology Act was mostly symbolic. "But it's still something," he said. "Now no one can say it never happened."

This post has been updated to reflect the role of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration in the deportations.