

## *Introduction*

Dear President of the USA

I am a girl that pass all my childhood hear in California. I came to America when I was only three year old. And we when to Mexico when I was 14 year old. And as soon as we got in Mexico my father daid. And we are having a very hard time to get along. We have no work to do. But if there was work we don't like to live in Mexico 4 of my sister are born hear in California and thay are allways sick because in Mexico the time is different for them. I am married, But I Married a very poor men and like we live in a very little Ranch there is no work to do. And he says he loves to come to America. All day long I on toking to my husband about my dear Calif. And he says that if you help us to come over hear that he will work the very best he can. And us that when to school and study the dear lesson of this lovely Book, Are wishing to come again to our dear America that we love so much.<sup>1</sup>

ON APRIL 20, 1939, Rosie Garcia sent a letter to President Roosevelt from Arandas, Jalisco to request passports for herself, her mother, her husband, and her six siblings. After opening her letter with a narrative of the hard time that befell her family upon their return to Mexico from the United States in 1932, she went on to apologize for her writing, stating that she had not read English-language books in seven years. She told the president, “Do your very best to send for us. Answer my letter as soon as you can.”

At the time of Rosie’s writing, nearly forty years of regular, circular, binational migrations had been taking place across the US-Mexico border. Rosie first arrived in the United States in 1921 at the age of three, at the dawn of a migration boom fueled by growing population pressures in Mexico, the need for temporary and low-paid labor in the United States, and the desire of families to reunite with relatives across the border. Boom-era migrations

were critically sustained and made possible by family networks that had been created throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. Rosie was a Mexican citizen, but her siblings, like so many other children born to Mexican migrants in the 1920s, were US citizens. Two years into the Great Depression, they were shuttled to a country they had never known. And although Rosie had been born in Mexico, grown up in two countries, and married a Mexican citizen, it is clear from her letter that President Roosevelt was very much her president. She was one of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of binational migrants living in an era that experienced the coerced return of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans back to Mexico, along with the hardening of a border that had at one time permitted multiple crossings and re-crossings.

Much of the history of Mexican immigration is told through parallel histories of shifting US immigration policy, economic contractions, and the demand for overwhelmingly male Mexican laborers in the US Southwest. These histories so often dominate what is known of Mexican immigrants to the United States that contemporary understanding and political debates are still framed within these channels. But there is another story that has often faded into the background, centring on family migration and the migration of Mexican women. In recent years, as family separation along the border has garnered more attention, policies regarding the US-Mexico border and its power to demarcate “legal” and “illegal” bodies have been increasingly questioned. More than just an entry point for necessary or excess laborers, the US-Mexico border should be recognized as a gateway for family migrations that have intertwined the histories and fates of the United States and Mexico for the past 150 years.

The typical Mexican migrant of the period from 1890 to 1965 is imagined to be young, male, single, and from a rural community, and yet both men and women of all ages, coming from various socioeconomic, political, and religious backgrounds, pioneered early migration routes. All were involved in the making of Mexican America by mid-century. Families pioneering early multidirectional and multigenerational migrations provided the foundations for generations of binational families. One of the central arguments of this book is that while factors driving migration were wide-ranging and changed over time, one constant held: migrants crossed borders to be with families. Despite changes in immigration policies, fortifications along the border, and attempts to restrict the permanent settlement of families in the United States, family-centered migration persisted. I define family-centered migra-

tion as that migration which is motivated by family reunion and family labor recruitment, and facilitated by family networks through the exchange of information, contacts, transportation, accommodation, and labor contacts. The historical depiction of Mexican migration through the lens of male labor migration, the paucity of sources pertaining to migrant women in traditional archives, and the US and Mexican governments' attempt to restrict family migration during the *bracero* era from 1942–1964 has resulted in an erasure of continuous and sustained family migration and particularly of the women and children who embarked on cross-border journeys. While excellent studies have shed light on post-1965 Mexican migration inclusive of women, fewer studies tell the story of migrant women and transnational Mexican migrant families in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

This book recovers a history of Mexican women, children, and families in particular, who crossed the US-Mexico border in the first half of the twentieth century—a history that is a vital part of the national history of the United States as well as Mexico. An exploration into Mexican and US archives, as well into how Mexico responded to the emigration of millions of Mexican families, provides a transnational lens from which to better understand migration and diasporas. I argue that extended families, including women, children, and the elderly, regularly embarked on cross-border journeys in the first decades of the twentieth century, and that they did so for familial and not just economic reasons. Migration across the US-Mexico border was always diverse, always driven by multiple factors, and was often circuitous, multidirectional and at times circular. The presence of women and families, however, has been rendered invisible because of gendered expectations regarding migration. I argue that women, in particular, were undocumented and as a result undercounted in the history of Mexican migration, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, frequently women and families were undocumented twice over—once entering the United States and once exiting.

The history of Mexican migration did not begin in the 1890s. Arguably it began in the 1830s when Mexicans, having found the border crossing them, left the new US territory on their own or were forced off their lands to return South. Demographic shifts, displacement and violence, and sometimes negotiation and cooperation describe the Mexican experience in the shifting US-Mexico borderlands of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Yet by the 1890s, as immigrants from all around the world were arriving to the western and eastern shores of the United States in high numbers, Mexican migrants, compelled

to travel long distances to cross a figurative border (with the exception of a few custom collections outposts), were beginning to establish the foundational migration routes and social and familial networks that would firmly take hold over the next century. Mexican families, including women and children, were also crucially significant in building up northern Mexican borderland communities from Baja California to Tamaulipas. These communities would witness both an influx of migrants from throughout Mexico and the circulation of migrants across the US-Mexico border.<sup>4</sup>

Work, adventure, opportunity, and security drew early migrants to the United States, but plenty of factors continuously propelled migration out of Mexico. Demographic pressure in regions that were being parceled out through a combination of inheritance and land maneuvers, especially in places like Jalisco and Michoacán, may have first driven men, but quickly spurred families, across the dividing line. Families settled in boxcar communities and near railyards throughout the United States drew more family members. By the time revolution hit Mexico in 1910, Mexicans from the western and northern states had already been migrating back and forth to the United States to reunite with family and play an ever-increasing role in US ranching, agriculture, and rail maintenance, especially throughout the Southwest. This chapter of Mexican migration, but one piece of a larger history of immigration to the United States, has often been told through the lens of labor migrations, and understandably so. With greater resources, increased capital, new irrigation systems, and industrializing technologies taking hold of the US Southwest, Mexican laborers became central to the maintenance of railroads and commercial cultivation. When viewed from Mexico, however, this period was not just marked by male laborers exiting, but by entire families leaving the fold of the nation.

Sending regions in Mexico witnessed the exodus of extended families, including women, children, and even the elderly. Mexico lost workers, yes, but Mexican communities lost families as well. In Los Altos de Jalisco, observers noted the exit of migrants to the United States at the turn of the century, predating the Mexican Revolution, the Cristero Rebellion, and the bracero program—major events and processes that would come to further engulf that region throughout the twentieth century. Members of extended families also came back and forth to Mexico as livelihoods, families, and communities were extended across borders early on. Mexican and Mexican-American communities in the United States, explored in important works such as George Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American* or Mario García's

*Desert Immigrants*, were towns made up of families of men, women and children, creating community with binational roots.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the fields and railroads, and beyond the Southwest, we find traces of Mexican migrants in shops, schools, churches, dancehalls, and mutual aid societies.

During the 1920s and 1930s, academics and policymakers including Paul S. Taylor, Manuel Gamio, and Carey McWilliams conducted studies in order to better understand how Mexican migrants lived and worked, and specifically how they fit within the existing labor systems of the United States.<sup>6</sup> While their field notes included information on a range of migrant experiences and migrant interviews, published works showed mostly laboring men in migration. These studies reflected then-prevailing preoccupations. Whereas Mexican migrant arrival during the first part of the 1920s signaled a welcome relief for some employers who sought to keep pace with the expanding needs of commercial agriculture, by mid-decade politicians began voicing concerns about the accompanying “social problems” that might arise from permanent settlement. Labor representatives had long deployed a portrayal of Mexican labor as temporary in order to justify the continued demand for Mexican migrants in agriculture, but immigration restrictionists gathered momentum in the late 1920s when it became clear that Mexicans would not simply return home to Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

Championed in part by labor organizers, and in part by nativists, restriction efforts zeroed in on arguments about Mexican labor as a threat to wages and Mexican families as a threat to citizenry based on fears of a foreign and racially different Other. To quell concerns of permanent settlement, employers repeated a refrain represented most clearly in an oft-cited passage by California labor representative S. P. Frisselle.

There is also in the minds of many the thought that the Mexican is an immigrant. My experience of the Mexican is that he is a ‘homer.’ Like the pigeon he goes back to roost. He is not a man that comes into this country for anything except our dollars and our work; and the railroads, and all of us, have been unsuccessful in keeping him here because he is a ‘homer.’ Those who know the Mexican know that is a fact.<sup>8</sup>

According to Frisselle, “the Mexican” was in the United States for dollars and work, not to make community. Migrant lives beyond work were rendered invisible. Despite his acknowledgment of the difficulties that emerged with migrant schooling and vaguely referencing other “social problems,” Frisselle’s testimony maintained a strong commitment to the idea that

Mexicans were not immigrants. Yet we know that Mexicans were both immigrants and migrants. Tucked into Frisselle's testimony was another equally important claim that would go on not only to complicate his argument but also to reveal what became a challenge for US policymakers, an opportunity for Mexican migrant families, and a reminder to future historians: "The one we want is the family Mexican, and we are dependent on him for the harvesting of our crops before school opens, because the men and their wives and children all work in the grape harvest and the Mexicans earn from \$4 to \$6 a day, with the family." Family and labor were inextricably tied in the history of Mexican migration.<sup>9</sup>

Family and labor are, accordingly, best viewed as overlapping concepts within the larger conceptual map of migration patterns, migrant motives, and Mexican and Mexican-American lives. Not all migration journeys incorporated family, but not all migration journeys incorporated labor either, and except for specific instances of labor recruitment, we know that families followed families and friends followed friends. In their work on migration to the United States from Western Mexico, Douglas Massey, Rafael Alarcón, Jorge Durand, and Humberto González suggest that while structural changes within sending and receiving countries might generate migration, "once begun, this migration eventually develops a social infrastructure that enables movement on a mass basis. Over time, the number of social ties between sending and receiving areas grows, creating a social network that progressively reduces the costs of international movement." These scholars also recognize that lifecycle changes shape family migration strategies, that networks of migration are sustained by return migration and by migrants who eventually settle more permanently in receiving communities, and that at individual and community levels, migration is likely to encourage repeated migrations.<sup>10</sup>

Social and familial relationships were critical to driving and sustaining Mexican migration during the twentieth century and were the foundation for Mexican-American communities in the United States. Mexican women were central to early community-building in the United States in both productive and reproductive ways. Broadening an analysis of early Mexican migration to include social and familial networks reveals the importance of women in the history of Mexican migration, and yet it would be a mistake to think that women only crossed for family reasons and not for education, work, adventure, or escape. Relatedly, it's worth emphasizing that migrant men, while being almost exclusively depicted as laborers seeking labor only, were also driven in their migrations by family-centered motivations.

Examining migration through the lens of social relationships reveals much about men, as well as women. Family-centered motivations include those which conditioned men to provide for their families through patriarchal compacts, as well as those which drove sons, brothers, uncles, and fathers to reunify with their family members in the United States for support, affection, and stability. Relationships were central to male migrations. Beyond dollars and labor, men and women built families and communities in the United States, and across borders.

Migrant networks expanded with every family member who crossed the border and when new migration routes were initiated within a family or community, more migrations were sure to follow. Responding to larger events that pushed and pulled at them, but also to very personal, relational and sometimes intimate factors, migrants continued to cross the US-Mexico border, and did so in both directions throughout the 1920s. Men and women went back and forth, often with families in tow. They became familiar with the routes, with the processes of migration, and with state officials along the way. For some binational living was a strategy, just as, for others who both wanted to and could, it was a strategy to establish residency and own a house in the United States. A vast diversity of migrant lives and communities existed across the Southwest and increasingly in the Midwest as well. Cross-border migrants became domestic migrants, fanning out across the country from winter homes in Texas to take up jobs in factories, construction, rail-yards, and agriculture. This movement occurred alongside cross-border migrations by professionals, students, and business owners, and even priests fleeing the Cristero conflict.<sup>11</sup> Growing Mexican *colonias* would steadily welcome newcomers throughout the twentieth century.

Births, marriages, celebrations, illness, death—expected and unexpected—could lead to return migration, and so too could national and global events. The Great Depression came down with stifling force along the border, stopping migrant families in their tracks. Xenophobic campaigns to “send Mexicans back to Mexico” resulted in expulsions, and in some cases provided the opportunity for migrants and immigrants alike to re-examine how viable their futures were in the United States. More than half a million Mexicans, including US-born Mexican children, went south in the largest wave of return migration up to that point, with some of them abruptly and callously uprooted from their lives, homes, and families. It would take a decade for the pendulum of mass migration to swing back. Months into a global war, the United States and Mexico found an opportunity to spark and reformat

the migratory process, to re-envision the diverse and many border crossings of the 1920s into a massive endeavor of continental labor redistribution. Families were left out of this political dealmaking. And yet all throughout the 1930s they had carried forward in their migrations, fighting hard to continue their binational living. Rosie Garcia was just one of many migrants writing to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, while hundreds of letters were written to Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas as well. Consuls, welfare officials, migration agents, family members, municipal presidents, and even national presidents were brought into a web of correspondence that would serve to manage and mediate exigent passages and frustrated migrations. Families with mixed citizenship status, or those who had been separated in the lean years, identified their intercessors and sent out their petitions to reclaim their chances at migration.

Prior to the bracero-era reformulation of cross-border migration, decades of crossings had led to thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of binational families. Families were made binational in two ways. First, migration patterns intersected with national and personal events in such a way that families were made up of both US and Mexican citizens. Take for example the *familia* Baltazar, who were repatriated to Mexico through Nogales in 1931. The father and mother were born in Pénjamo, Guanajuato, at the turn of the century, then after having migrated to Denver, Colorado, they had their first child in 1919. Their second child was born in Pénjamo five years later, after which the family moved back to the United States, first to Santa Rita, New Mexico, where they had their third child, and then to Simons, California, where they had their fourth child in 1929. By the time the family was repatriated, they had moved at least four times, including three times across the international border, creating a binational mixed-citizenship-status family in the process. Mixed-status families faced a different set of logistical challenges since they were not easily classified as either Mexican or American, thereby implicitly and unintentionally defying strict concepts of national identity that were taking hold across the globe at the time. On the US-Mexico border, nationality was reified and imposed through unwavering migration fees, more rigid exclusions, stricter border enforcement, and added criminal penalties for those who crossed illegally. Migrations for all, but for border-crossing families with multiple citizenships in particular, became harder to navigate.

Then there was the binationalism, or biculturalism, that emerged simply through the experience of having lived in two countries. Repeated and circular migrations meant that Mexican-born and US-born border-crossers