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## Righting Deportation's Wrongs



*During the Great Depression, the United States deported between 500,000 and two million Mexicans, many of them American citizens. The fight for reparations—and an apology—continues.*

by Matt Alderton

One day in 1935, upon returning home from her Los Angeles elementary school, 9-year-old Emilia Castañeda was put on a train, with her father and brother, to El Paso, Texas, where she was shepherded across the Mexican border into a country she had never visited and knew nothing about.

"All we were able to take with us was a trunk," Castañeda, now 78, recalls. "It was cold and it was dark. I was crying. There were a lot of people crying. We didn't want to go."

Castañeda, who was born in Los Angeles in 1926 and currently lives in Riverside, Calif., was one of thousands deported to Mexico during the Great Depression in an effort by government officials to free up jobs for American citizens. Called the Mexican Repatriation, the campaign was authorized by President Herbert Hoover and was accomplished at the hands of federal, state and local authorities across the country.

"The national unemployment rate in this period was 30 to 40 percent," says Jorge Chapa, director of Latino Studies at Indiana University. "People were really scared. In many areas, Mexicans were scapegoats, blamed for taking jobs then as they are now."

Historians estimate that between 500,000 and two million people—60 percent of them children—were removed from the United States during the 1930s, including scores of legal immigrants and American citizens of Mexican descent.

"One of the amazing things about repatriation was that it wasn't focused on undocumented immigrants," Chapa says, "but on Mexican-Americans who were citizens."

Now, more than 70 years later, that community is asking for an apology. So far, its calls are unanswered.

### Not From Here, Not From There

Ignacio Piña's mother was making tortillas in 1931 when three armed officials entered his home in western Montana. They arrested his entire family, including his parents and five siblings, and drove them to Utah, where they spent a week in prison before boarding a train to Mexico. Piña was 6 years old.

"I know that I don't have much to go in this life," Piña, 80, says. "But it hurts me to think back on the past and how our rights were violated. We were born here, and they just kicked you out."



A white section gang works near King City, Calif. Before the Great Depression, this type of work was done entirely by Mexican labor.



"Repatriados en Torreón" by Diego Rivera  
Mexican laborers and their families depicted returning to Mexico from the United States. Deportees included children born to Mexican workers residing in the United States.

"It was coerced cooperation," Chapa says. "It was tremendously disruptive personally, financially and emotionally, both for the people who were repatriated and those who stayed here."

Piña's father, a former coal miner, died in 1934, leaving his mother to raise six children in a less-than-welcoming landscape.

"We were misfits," he says. "We were people from another country, not from here, not from there."

Piña currently lives in Bakersfield, Calif. In 1934, however, he moved with his family—hungry and poor—into a one-room shack in Mexico City.

"When it rained it sounded like a machine gun hitting the tin roof," he says. "My wife says, 'Try to forget.' How could I forget? It's so vivid in my mind. Sometimes I even have nightmares."

Castañeda had a similar experience. She spoke little Spanish and lived in rural Mexico, where she had neither running water nor the opportunity to receive education. Other children teased her and her brother; they called them "repatriados," a derogatory term for the newly-deported class of Mexican-Americans.

"It was a miserable life in Mexico," she says.

### Recognition

Castañeda returned to the United States in 1944, just four days shy of her 18th birthday. Piña returned in 1946. Returning, for them and thousands others, meant starting from scratch, relearning English and coming to terms with a country they loved, but which had done them so much wrong.

"They were forced to leave with nothing and forced to come back with nothing," says Christine Valenciana, Castañeda's daughter, who collected an oral history of 10 "Repatriados," including her mother, as an undergraduate at California State University, Fullerton. "I'm humbled by the courage of these people. They're now senior citizens in their late 70s and early 80s and were able to use two languages to survive in hostile situations on both sides of the border."

Currently an assistant professor of elementary and bilingual education at Fullerton, Valenciana and her husband, Francisco Balderrama, have studied repatriation for more than a decade, working on behalf of survivors to receive reparations and an apology from the U.S. government.

"[Survivors] ask that this be recognized. They ask that the government study this. They ask that this be put in textbooks. And when they ask for recognition, they are also asking for an apology, because they feel their rights have been violated," says Balderrama, coauthor of "Decade of Betrayal," a book chronicling the repatriation program.



Mexican-Americans newly arrived to Mexico.

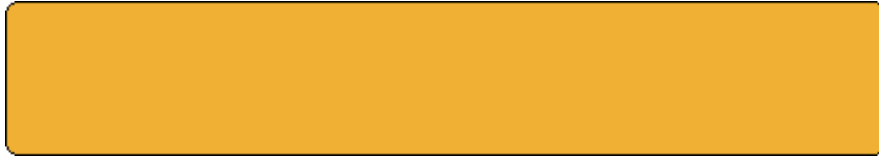
In September, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed two bills written by state Sen. Joe Dunn that would have allowed those who were illegally deported during the Great Depression to file for damages. The first, Senate Bill 37, would have opened a two-year window during which victims could seek damages. The second, Senate Bill 427, would have created a state commission to investigate the deportations, laying the groundwork for formal reparations, similar to those granted in the 1980s to victims of the Japanese-American internment during World War II.

"While I am very sympathetic towards victims who were involuntarily sent to Mexico as a result of repatriation efforts within California between 1929 and 1944, these individuals were able to pursue legal action within a fixed period of time," Schwarzenegger wrote in his veto message to the State Senate. The statute of limitations on pursuing legal action has run out, he said, adding that allowing legal claims would burden the courts and result in increased costs to the state and local governments.

Dunn plans to raise the issue in California again in January while Rep. Hilda Solis, D-Calif., plans to introduce a bill in Congress to investigate the deportations and determine whether reparations are appropriate.

But Castañeda says it's not about compensation. It's about recognition.

"All I want is an apology," she says, "from the county of Los Angeles, from the state and the federal [government]. I'm not asking for anything. I'm an American."



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