

The past and present of immigration



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Everyday news outlets report on topics and trends that correlate to our history. Following these news outlets gives a better understanding of these trends in today's America. This paper will look at these trends from our past and compare it to the present condition. It will analyze differing viewpoints on the topic, and it will explain the change over time.

The world hears of America as the land of opportunity. Because of this, millions of people flock to the US each year. Some come through our borders legally, eventually becoming naturalized citizens. Some come here as tourists or students and decide to stay when their visas expire. Others are so desperate to better their lives they paddle onto our shores in bathtubs and homemade rafts. People want to get here in any way they can. This paper will specifically analyze two major migrations of people: the Irish from the 19th century and the current Mexican migration.

In 1845 Ireland experienced the greatest potato famine up to that date. The source of food wiped away from the population, this event catalyzed a mass migration. Five weary years of undependable crops plighted the country, throwing the lowly peasant class into starvation. All hope gone, survivors only wished to flee.

The only way out was emigration. Starving families could not pay landlords and had nowhere else to turn except for America. America, the land of opportunity. Irish immigration into America was already a rising trend. However, in the 1840s the number of immigrants skyrocketed. Nearly 2 million Irish came into the country in that decade. The flow increased for five years. Slowly, the first immigrants saved the money to bring family over the

Atlantic, increasing the number of immigrants exponentially. There began a slight decline for ten years after 1855 until 1865. Nonetheless, small groups of families still continued to arrive after the Civil War. Between 1820 and 1880 nearly 3.5 Irish men immigrated to the United States.

Emigrating to the United States was not an easy feat, and it was not the easy life some had expected. However, it did offer a better environment than the barren old country. Poor refugees arrived with nothing. They had little to no resources to start a farm or business and had a grueling time providing for the family at all. Very few immigrants were put into a position that allowed them to make their own decisions on their way of living at all. Fortunately for them, the expansion of the American economy created heavy demands for muscle grunt.

The great canals, which were the first links in the national transportation system were still being dug in the 1820s and 1830s, and in the time between 1830 and 1880, thousands of miles of rail were being laid. With no bulldozers existing at the time, the pick and the shovel were the only earth-moving equipment at the time. And the Irish laborers were the mainstay of the construction gangs that did this grueling work. In towns along the sites of work, groups of Irish formed their small communities to live in.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, American cities began to rapidly expand and began to develop an infrastructure and needed personnel to run these cities. This is the Irish's first break in America. Irish men filled the ranks of city's police force and firemen. The Irish all almost monopolized these jobs as soon as they were created. " Irish workmen not only began

laying the horse car and streetcar tracks, but were some of the first drivers and conductors. The first generations worked largely at unskilled and semiskilled occupations, but their children found themselves working at increasingly skilled trades.” By the turn of the century, Irish made up nearly a third of “ plumbers, steamfitters, and boilermakers.” Irishmen soon found themselves being given positions as managers as unskilled laborers began coming from other areas of Europe.

While immigrants can change the shape of a culture, as seen with the Irish migration, those same immigrants are beneficial to industrial growth. That same idea also holds true for Mexican immigrants. Now this research paper will take a look into the Mexican migration that this country is witnessing now. It will begin with a historical background.

Fifty-five thousand Mexican workers immigrated to the United States between the years 1850 and 1880 to become field hands in newly won regions of the US that had been Mexico a few years previous. This is the time period in which commercial agriculture, the mining industry, light industry and the railroad all became dependant on the Mexican laborer. Needless to say, working conditions and salaries of the Mexicans were poor.

After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the new Mexican government was not able to improve the lives of its citizens. Soon after this event became a crisis, the fields of Mexico harvested increasingly smaller bounties and employment soon became hard to come by. Much like his Irish counterpart, Mexicans had to move to survive. World War I also stoked the fire of Mexican immigration. Mexican workers worked well in industry and service professions, working as

machinists, mechanics, painters and plumbers. These years fostered employment opportunities for Mexicans because much of the existing U. S. labor force was across the Atlantic fighting in France for the Allies.

Entrepreneurs came to Mexico searching for workers who could fill jobs in the railway and agriculture industries of the United States.

Mexican workers' complaints about the abuse of their labor rights eventually led the Mexican government to action. Led by Venustiano Carranza in 1920, the Mexican government composed a model contract that guaranteed Mexican workers certain rights named in the Mexican Political Constitution. The contract demanded that U. S. ranchers allow workers to bring their families along during the period of the contract. No worker was allowed to leave for the United States without a contract, signed by an immigration official, which stated the rate of pay, work schedule, place of employment and other similar conditions. Thus, this became the first de facto Bracero Program between the two countries.

In 1924, the U. S. Border Patrol was created, an event which would have a significant impact on the lives of Mexican workers. Though the public did not immediately view Mexicans as “ illegal aliens,” the law now stated that undocumented workers were fugitives. With the advent of the Border Patrol, the definition “ illegal alien” is born, and many Mexican citizens north of the border were subject to much suspicion.

The Mexican work force was critical in developing the economy and prosperity of the United States. The Mexican workers in numerous accounts were regarded as strong and efficient. As well, they were willing to work for

low wages, in working conditions that were questionably humane. Another measure of control was imposed on the Mexican immigrant workers during the depression: visas were denied to all Mexicans who failed to prove they had secure employment in the United States. The Mexicans who were deported under this act were warned that if they came back to the United States, they would be considered outlaws.

It seemed whenever the United States found a reason to close the door on Mexican immigration, a historic event would force them to reopen that door. Such was the case when the United States entered World War II. In 1942, the United States was heading to war with the fascist powers of Europe. Labor was siphoned from all areas of United States industry and poured into those which supported the war efforts. Also in that year, the United States signed the Bracero Treaty which reopened the floodgates for legal immigration of Mexican laborers. Between the period of 1942 and 1964, millions of Mexicans were imported into the U. S. as “braceros” under the Bracero Program to work temporarily on contract to United States growers and ranchers.

Under the Bracero Program, more than 4 million Mexican farm workers came to work the fields of the United States. Impoverished Mexicans fled their rural communities and traveled north to work as braceros. It was mainly by the Mexican hand that America became the most lush agricultural center in the world. The braceros were principally experienced farm workers who hailed from regions such as Coahuila, “la Comarca Lagunera,” and other crucial agricultural regions in Mexico. They left their own lands and families chasing a rumor of economic boom in the United States.

The Bracero Program contracts were controlled by independent farmer associations and the “ Farm Bureau,” and were written in English, and many braceros would sign them without understanding the rights they were giving away nor the terms of the employment. The braceros were allowed to return to their native lands only in case of emergency, and required written permission from their employer. When the contracts expired, the braceros were mandated to hand over their permits and return to Mexico. The braceros in the United States were busy thinning sugar beets, picking cucumbers and tomatoes and weeding and picking cotton.

At the end of World War II, Mexican workers were ousted from their jobs by workers coming out of wartime industries and by returning servicemen. By 1947, the Emergency Farm Labor Service was working on decreasing the amount of Mexican labor imported. By the 1960s, an overflow of “ illegal” agricultural workers along with the invention of the mechanical cotton harvester, diminished the practicality and appeal of the bracero program. These events, added to the gross humanitarian violations of bracero employers, brought the program to an end in 1964.

Once we step back from our emotional opinions, we should see that the Mexican migration is much like the Irish migration. We can choose to embrace that, or we can choose to fight it. Either way it will be very hard to stop if it can be stopped at all. But we must ask ourselves a simple question. Why stop it? America was founded on people like these, struggling to survive. They came and made America what it is. The Irish came and transformed America. Why shouldn't we allow these immigrants to do the

same (if they enter legally of course)? Is our pride getting in the way of progress?