

Mexican American Voices

EDITED BY **STEVEN MINTZ**



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Preface

An unconscious ethnocentrism pervades the teaching of American history. While students learn that the English arrived in Virginia in 1607 and that the Pilgrims reached Plymouth in 1620, few realize that the first European exploration of what is now the United States took place in Florida in 1513 or that the first European settlement was a town established by Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón at San Miguel de Gualdape on the coast of Georgia in 1526.

When we speak of immigration, we refer to the great waves of migration from Europe, and tend to forget the large migrations from China, Japan, and Latin America, and especially Mexico. Discussions of industrialization focus on the great factories of the Northeast, overlooking the growth of large-scale mining or commercial agriculture in the Southwest. The treatment of urbanization centers on the Northeast or Midwest, neglecting the West, in the late nineteenth century one of the most heavily urbanized regions of the country. When we examine the civil rights movement, we look foremost at the South.

Fixing on the eastern seaboard renders invisible a whole group of Americans: Mexican Americans. The phrase "Mexican Americans" itself, while convenient, is ethnocentrically Anglo, for as inhabitants of the Americas, Mexicans living south of the Rio Grande are as American as citizens of the United States, whom Hispanics call *estadounidenses*. Now that Mexican Americans are the country's fastest growing ethnic group and the center of political power has shifted from the Northeast to the Sunbelt, it is essential to pay close attention to the parts of the country that were originally colonized by Spain.

This volume's primary goal is to recover a history that has been marginalized for far too long and bring it to center stage. This volume incorporates today's Mexican Americans and their ancestors into the narrative of American history.

The study of Mexican-American history forces us to confront some unpleasant truths about our past. In the pages that follow, we

will examine the forces that pushed the United States into the Southwest and discover what the Texas Revolution and the Mexican War meant for the inhabitants of the region. We will see what the development of the Great Southwest meant for the people who toiled in canneries, oil fields, copper mines and smelters, and rail yards. We can begin to appreciate the costs of many of our society's greatest achievements.

Introduction

In 1994, when the U.S. Postal Service released a series of stamps that celebrated twenty “Legends of the West,” critics pointed out that none of the stamps portrayed a figure of Mexican ancestry. No one viewing the stamps would understand that Mexicans and Mexican Americans were among the true pioneers in the history of the West, that they had a critical role in colonizing, developing, and shaping the culture and history of the region.

The exclusion of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from the postage stamp series is consistent with a custom of slighting the Mexican-American contribution to American history. Settlers from Mexico have been living in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas for as long as Europeans have lived on the East Coast. Yet this history is largely unknown to most Americans. Insofar as it is recognized at all, Mexican-American history is treated as a subset of western history. Even recently published textbooks tend to omit Mexican Americans from discussions of immigration, industrialization, and unionization.

Today, Mexican Americans are the youngest and fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. But Mexican Americans are also among the nation’s oldest communities, with a rich and complex history. This book draws on the voices of Mexican Americans to describe the Mexican-American experience from the colonization of the Southwest and Mexico’s revolt against Spanish rule to the recruitment of Mexicans to work in mining, on railroads, and in commercial agriculture, along with present-day controversies involving immigration and bilingual education.

The product of a unique melding of cultures and of a distinctive history, the Mexican-American world includes descendants of the Spanish, Indians, and Africans, families that have resided in the United States for generations as well as many recent immigrants. It encompasses rural folk and a long-standing urban population. While

the labels have changed over time—Mexican(o), Tejano, Hispano, Californio, Mexican American, La Raza, Chicano/Chicana, and Latino/Latina—the people of Mexican descent have been an active presence on this continent for more than three centuries. To cite just one example, in 1610, Spanish explorers founded Santa Fe, a decade before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

This book emphasizes the essential contributions that Mexicans and Mexican Americans have made to the history and national identity of the United States. Mexican-American culture is the product of a distinctive history—a heritage shaped not by the Revolution of the North American British colonies or even the Civil War, but by the Mexican War for Independence, the Mexican War with the United States, the Mexican Revolution, and ongoing struggles over immigration, resources, and education. An understanding of the Mexican-American experiences requires rethinking the major themes of American history. The story of America's settlement, of westward expansion, of immigration, of organized labor, of civil rights—all acquire new meaning when viewed from the vantage point of Mexican Americans.

Today, Mexicans and Mexican Americans are changing American life irreversibly. More than any other ethnic group, they have transformed a biracial society into a truly multiracial society; a monolingual society into a bilingual society. But perhaps the greatest impact of Mexican Americans on American life can be summed up in the Spanish word *mestizaje*. The Mexican concept of *mestizaje*, which involves cultural blending and mixture and a recognition of cultural diversity, provides a fresh way to think about our society, its history, and its future.

For a century, a prevailing American attitude toward the absorption of immigrants was assimilation, the essential abandonment of immigrant ways for the customs of the established majority. In reality, assimilation did not mean the disappearance of European, African, or Asian heritages. Ethnic groups practiced an assertive multiculturalism, maintaining distinctive religious traditions, foodways, and cultural practices, and using politics to defend their groups' interests. The result was the creation of a hybrid culture, a culture shaped by blending, borrowing, and the mutual influence of culture groups. Languages were blended into an apparently uni-ethnic English. Our music, diet, fashion, and sports all reflect a process of borrowing and intermixture.

Long before multiculturalism became definable by name as a moral and aesthetic value, this country was achieving something superior both to the ethnic viciousness one finds in the Balkans and many other parts of the world, and to the quest for ethnic purity of each of the Balkan nationalities. But cultural pluralism co-existed

with prejudice, discrimination, and inequality; Anglo-American bigots denied that certain groups could ever be integrated into the larger society. Chicanos and Chicanas did not experience multiculturalism or assimilation; instead, they suffered outright exclusion alternating with studied neglect. If our country is going to rise above its past failings, if it is going to stand for something greater than the pursuit of individual self-interest, then it is essential that it embrace the ideal of *mestizaje*, a concept of cultural diversity, blending, and mutual influence.

Today, many Americans feel a void in our culture. Mainstream American culture seems bland, denatured, and homogenized. Mexican and Mexican-American culture is, in contrast, old, rich, dynamic, and varied. In recent years, it has regenerated American food, dress, music, and artistic, literary, and cultural expression. Above all, the concept of *mestizaje* provides an invaluable ideal as Americans enter a new, multicultural and international century.

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PART I

America's Spanish Heritage

When Anglo-Americans ventured westward, they did not enter uninhabited land. The region had been settled for hundreds of years. Before the Southwest was American, it was Indian and Spanish, and after that, Mexican.

It was Spain that had initially brought Europe to our country's southern and western half, from the Florida Keys to Alaska. Spain's northern empire included not only Florida and the Great Southwest, but also areas in the deep South and lower Midwest. Spain, for example, founded towns that would eventually become Memphis, Tennessee, and Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Spain considered the frontier north of Mexico as a relatively unimportant part of its New World empire. Spanish objectives in the northern frontier were twofold: to convert the Indians to Catholicism and to serve as a buffer to protect wealthier areas of central Mexico.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to belittle Spain's impact on the Southwest, even though it exercised sovereignty over the region for three centuries. Conflict with Indians and the failure to find major silver or gold deposits made it difficult to persuade settlers to colonize the region. Spanish settlement was largely confined to religious missions, a few small civilian towns, and military posts intended to prevent encroachment by Russia, France, and England. It was not until 1749 that Spain established the first civilian town in Texas, a town that eventually became Laredo; and not before 1769 did Spain establish permanent settlements in California.

Fixated on religious conversion and military control, Spain

inhibited economic development. Following the dictates of an economic philosophy known as mercantilism, aimed at protecting its own manufacturers, Spain restricted trade, prohibited manufacturing, stifled local industry and handicrafts, impeded the growth of towns, and prevented civilians from selling to soldiers. The government required all trade to be conducted through Veracruz and levied high excise taxes that greatly increased the cost of transportation. It exercised a monopoly over tobacco and gunpowder and prohibited the capture of wild horses. Still, Spain left a lasting imprint on the Southwest.

Such institutions as the rodeo and the cowboy (the *vaquero*) had their roots in Spanish culture. Place names, too, bear witness to the region's Spanish heritage. Los Angeles, San Antonio, Santa Fe, and Tucson were all founded by the Spanish. To this day, the Spanish pattern of organizing towns around a central plaza bordered by churches and official buildings is found throughout the region. Spanish architectural styles—adobe walls, tile roofs, wooden beams, and intricate mosaics—continue to characterize the Southwest.

By introducing European livestock and vegetation, Spanish colonists transformed the Southwest's economy, environment, and physical appearance. The Spanish introduced horses, cows, sheep, and goats, as well tomatoes, chilies, Kentucky bluegrass, and a variety of weeds. As livestock devoured the region's tall native grasses, a new and distinctly southwestern environment arose, one of cactus, sagebrush, and mesquite. The Spanish also introduced temperate and tropical diseases, which reduced the Indian population by fifty to ninety percent.

It is equally important that in attitudes toward class and race Spanish possessions differed from the English colonies. While a small elite based its status on its racial background and ownership of land, most colonists were of mixed racial backgrounds, and racial mixture continued throughout the Spanish colonial period. In general, *mestizos* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry) and Indians were concentrated in the lower levels of the social structure.

Even in the colonial period, New Spain's northern frontier served as a beacon of opportunity for poorer Mexicans. The earliest Hispanic settlers forged pathways that would draw Mexican immigrants in the future.