

Name: _____ Class: _____

Mexican Migrant Workers in the 20th Century

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The United States is a nation made up of people with many different backgrounds. Since Mexico is a neighboring country, many of these people are Mexican or Mexican-American. This informational text describes how many immigrants and Mexican-Americans worked on farms for low pay and little respect throughout the 20th century, and even today. As you read this text, take notes on the relationship between prejudice and earning a living.

- [1] Have you ever had to move to a different town before? Maybe you just moved somewhere new, or maybe you have always lived in the same place. But can you imagine having to move to a new place every few months? This is what Mexican migrant farm workers had to do in California in the 1900s. Because they worked in fields and farms, they had to move several times a year, every time there was a new crop to harvest.

Who worked in the fields?

Many people of Mexican descent¹ had lived in California for a long time before it first became an American state in 1850. The territory used to belong to Mexico, and many residents did not leave when the United States bought the land.

However, even more Mexican immigrants crossed the border when Mexico experienced a revolution in 1910. The revolution put some in danger and they fled for safety. The revolution also caused an economic downturn in Mexico, and many workers realized they could earn more money in the United States than they could in their home country.

Workers continued to move to California and other southwest states throughout the 1920s. The U.S. government set up a program to give immigrants short-term work visas.² The program was designed for workers to come to the U.S. for a short time, just long enough to earn money to send back to their families. Most workers relied on these visas to stay in the country, but some stayed long enough to earn their citizenship and have children.



"Rural rehabilitation camps for migrants in California" by Dorothea Lange is in the public domain.

1. people whose ancestors were born in Mexico
2. A visa is an official document that legally allows someone to be in another country for a particular amount of time.

- [5] When the Great Depression³ hit the U.S. in the 1930s, unemployment across the country rose to 25%. Many white Americans grew upset, believing that immigrants were “taking” their jobs. They blamed the Mexican workers for the fact that so many other people did not have jobs. Local and even state governments began to deport⁴ anyone who looked Mexican. Police did not bother to check if the people they removed were citizens.

Life as a migratory worker

The workers who remained in the states often became migratory workers. They had to move around as different crops came into season, so they could be employed all year round. Life as a migratory worker in the 1930s was hard. Even though agriculture⁵ in California depended on migratory workers, they made the lowest wages in the country. Farm owners did not treat their laborers with respect. Most farms did not have bathroom facilities or water for the workers to drink, and there was no place to wash dangerous pesticide chemicals off their hands.

Families moved too much and did not make enough money to own a house, so they usually stayed in makeshift homes right next to the fields. They built these houses out of whatever they could find, including scrap wood, cardboard, canvas, or tin cans. Although it was technically illegal, some children had to work in the fields alongside their parents for long hours. Even when children could go to school during the days, they had to change schools so often that it was very difficult to learn.

Government intervention

The U.S. government started programs to help families hurt by the Great Depression, but few of these programs applied to agricultural workers. The one program that brought some assistance was the Farm Security Administration, which set up living camps and provided food and medicine to migratory workers. They separated Mexican and Mexican-American workers from whites because they did not want racial tensions to cause problems in the camps.

A few Mexican workers tried to organize strikes⁶ and protests during the Depression, but they did not succeed in improving working or living conditions. After the Depression ended, life did not get much easier for the migratory laborers. However, change began when Cesar Chavez⁷ first created a union⁸ for farm workers in 1965: the National Farm Workers Association. Chavez and the NFWA wanted higher wages and better working conditions for all laborers, Mexican and white alike.

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3. The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in U.S. history. Record numbers of people were unemployed and living in poverty because of the Great Depression in the 1930s.
 4. **Deport (verb):** to force someone officially to leave the country
 5. farming, growing crops, and raising livestock
 6. Strikes are a way for workers to unite and decide all together not to work until their employer will agree to discuss demands for fair wages, different hours, or safer working conditions. The employer may decide their work and training is valuable and agree to meet with the workers, or the employer may simply hire new workers and fire the old ones.
 7. Cesar Chavez was an important American workers' rights leader and civil rights activist. He was originally a Mexican American farm worker who experienced unfair working conditions first hand.
 8. A union is a group of workers who unite in order to bargain with their employer.

Reform at last

- [10] One of Chavez's most famous campaigns was his strike and boycott⁹ against grape growers in California. It began in 1965 when fruit companies refused to meet the demands of their workers. The workers went on strike and would not agree to keep working until they were paid better. To raise awareness and pressure the fruit companies, Chavez organized a 300-mile march to Sacramento, the capital of California. He also encouraged consumers around the country not to buy grapes. Finally, in 1970, the grape growers agreed to give their workers better wages.

Today, Mexican immigrants or people of Mexican descent still make up a large majority of farm workers. In 2005, a survey found that 53% of these workers were undocumented workers,¹⁰ 21% were permanent residents, and 25% were full U.S. citizens. Most farm workers still make less than \$10,000 per year, especially since many are paid per bucket of fruit they pick, rather than per hour. Despite some improvements from the 1930s, being a farm worker is still a dangerous and difficult job. Many organizations and politicians are still working to improve the lives of migrant laborers across the country.

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9. **Boycott (noun):** an act of refusing to use, buy, or deal with a person, organization, or country as a form of protest
10. workers who came into the country secretly, without a visa or citizenship

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best identifies a central idea of this text? [RI.2]
- A. America has always welcomed immigrants who built the country and made it more productive through history.
 - B. During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce, but there was always a place for laborers working American soil to become wealthy and live out the American dream.
 - C. Mexicans invaded America in the 1930s because there were no jobs in Mexico and they wanted to steal American wealth.
 - D. Life as a migrant worker was difficult because of poverty and prejudice, and because it was hard to constantly adapt to life on the move.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "and many workers realized they could earn more money in the United States than they could in their home country" (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Most workers relied on these visas to stay in the country, but some stayed long enough to earn their citizenship and have children" (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "they made the lowest wages in the country. Farm owners did not treat their laborers with respect" (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "The U.S. government started programs to help families hurt by the Great Depression," (Paragraph 8)

3. What is the author's purpose for putting the word "taking" in quotation marks in paragraph 5? Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RI.5]

4. PART A: What does the term "migratory workers" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 6? [RI.4]
- A. People who remain in one country
 - B. People who leave their country permanently
 - C. Agricultural workers or farmers
 - D. Workers who move from place to place

5. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "The workers who remained in the states often became migratory workers" (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "They had to move around the state as different crops came into season," (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "so they could be employed all year round" (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "Even though agriculture in California depended on migratory workers," (Paragraph 6)

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. When Americans were unemployed because of the Great Depression, many blamed Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American citizens. In your opinion, were these people prejudiced for holding this belief? Why or why not?
2. In the context of this article, how does prejudice emerge? What are some of the effects of this prejudice? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. Even when the United States had high unemployment, it still granted visas to immigrants seeking work. In your opinion, is this fair? Why or why not?
4. Agriculture is important because everyone needs to eat, and yet migrant workers were paid low wages for decades (and in many cases, they still are). In your opinion, is this fair? Why or why not?
5. How did change eventually come about for migrant workers in the United States? To create change, is the government, unions (or groups of people together in general), or a strong leader important? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.