



THE MEXICAN AMERICAN: A NATIONAL CONCERN

THE WETBACK TIDE

HART STILWELL

EARLY in October, 1948, thousands of Mexicans from as far south as the state of Michoacan began assembling at Juarez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. They were on their way to work in cotton fields, beet fields, and other fields in southwestern and western states. They had come in response to reports of wages in the United States which were, in terms of pesos, far above anything these people could make in their homeland.

At the border, this small current in a dark tide moving steadily northward came to a halt. Difficulties developed between Mexican officials in Juarez and American officials in El Paso. Mexican officials contended that the workers should receive \$3 a hundred pounds for the first picking of cotton, and more for subsequent pickings. American officials contended that the agreement between the two nations under which laborers were being moved back and forth provided that the prevailing wage in an area should be paid. This wage, they said, was \$2 a hundred.

The Mexican laborers were in no position to wait. They were without funds, some of them hungry, few of them with a place in which to sleep under a roof. They began crossing the river, permit or no

permit. In a period of a few days, four thousand were rounded up and returned to the Mexican side of the river, during which time no progress was made in discussions between the Mexican and American officials.

Then Grover C. Willmoth, district immigration director at El Paso, told his inspectors to let the bars down. The Mexicans began streaming across. If there was any effort on the part of Mexican officials to stop them, it was not effective. And the Americans claimed that Mexican soldiers actually helped the laborers across the international border.

As the immigrants crossed, they were placed under technical arrest by U.S. immigration officials and were then paroled to the United States Employment Service. The Employment Service rationed them out to waiting employers and labor agents, and soon the Mexicans were crowded into trucks and on their way to the cotton and beet fields.

Director Willmoth of the Immigration Service contended that Mexican officials had broken the agreement with the United States in demanding \$3 a hundred for cotton picking before permitting the laborers to cross. Don Lorin of Washington, chief of the farm placement division of the U.S. Employment Service,

was more outspoken. On the scene in El Paso he said, "These Mexican officials [in Juarez] were pointing a pistol at the American farmer's head. It was an outright breach of the labor agreement."

These are strange words to be coming from a high U.S. official. However, they are consistent with the general attitude of the American employer group, which Mr. Lorin represents, toward the Mexican, particularly the Mexican immigrant laborer.

The Mexicans crossed. Mexico broke off the labor agreement. Other Mexicans continued to cross, at El Paso and elsewhere along the border, legally or illegally. They continued to cross as they have been doing since the early days of the last war. In recent months officials of the two nations have conducted a prolonged series of conferences seeking to work out a new agreement. Mexico wants an agreement on the theory that she can then make it possible for her people to enter the United States legally, thus, theoretically, giving them a slightly improved economic status. This nation wants an agreement in order to increase the tide of low-priced labor.

At this writing, negotiations have come to a standstill as a result of disagreement on two points: first, Mexico wants the laborers recruited at their place of residence, while the United States wants to recruit them at the border; and, second, Mexico wants to retain the right to blacklist areas or states in which there is discrimination, while the United States wants this right.

Mexico's desire to have recruiting done at the home of the laborer is quite natural. It would tend to avoid such scenes as those at Juarez and El Paso. There would be no such unorganized, chaotic movements toward the border in response to vague promises. As for the business of banning Mexican immigrants in areas

where there is discrimination, Mexico's position is easily understood. Presumably the Employment Service would be the United States' agency to determine the areas in which discrimination existed. The spectacle of Mr. Lorin looking for discrimination against Mexicans might appear humorous to some people; it wouldn't appear that way to the Mexicans.

The entire story of what happened at El Paso has not been told. It will never be told, since the ten thousand who crossed the Rio Grande are scattered over a tremendous area, and it is their story that is important. A few of them were interviewed. They said they had been led to believe they would receive \$3 or more a hundred pounds for picking cotton.

In fact, Mexico City newspapers and other newspapers in that Republic frequently complain of the lavish promises spread throughout Mexico by American employers and labor agents in order to create the migrations to the border.

Getting down to the basic disagreement, what is a basic wage in an area, particularly one in which a crop is just maturing? How is the wage set? Without any doubt in the world, the wage in the areas toward which those immigrant laborers were headed was set by that very factor—availability of a large, expendable surplus of labor. The immigration officials at El Paso, in fact, admitted this when they issued a statement, printed in El Paso newspapers at that time, warning employers that if they "continued" to take advantage of the situation and pay only \$1.50 a hundred, then the immigration inspectors would be ordered to round up the laborers and ship them back to Mexico. It is significant that in those parts of the South where there was no large supply of immigrant labor available, the wage was higher, \$3 or even more. A "prevailing" wage can be whatever a group of em-

THE WETBACK TIDE

ployers, viewing the available labor supply, decide to make it. Mexicans have finally learned that.

What happened at El Paso is only a small part of what is happening along the entire United States-Mexico border from Brownsville to San Diego. The El Paso incident was significant only insofar as it put U.S. immigration officials definitely on record in the attitude of the Service, and official Washington, toward enforcement of the immigration laws. It revealed what has been generally known along the border since 1943—that the United States is not making any effort to check the tide of wetbacks.

II

Wetback is a term used in Texas to designate illegally entered Mexicans. Nobody knows how many wetbacks there are in Texas today. Estimates range from 100,000 to 400,000. Since Mexico has for years refused to permit legal entry of her nationals into Texas, on the grounds that there is racial and economic discrimination against them, it is almost impossible for a Mexican to enter the state legally.

Wetbacks enter by wading or swimming the Rio Grande (hence the term), and are subject to deportation. During those days when this nation did not want more laborers, these illegally entered Mexicans were hunted down with great diligence, arrested, placed in jail, then deported—sometimes without a trial, sometimes after a trial in federal court. Second offenders were given jail sentences. Third offenders were sent to federal prison for a year and a day. In those days it was a crime to enter the United States illegally. It still is a crime for some people—D.P.'s from Europe, stowaways, etc.—to enter this nation illegally. According to the statutes it is a crime for a Mexican laborer to enter illegally. Actually, it is not.

The wetback is welcomed. He is not molested unless he commits a crime of some other kind, or unless a formal complaint is made against him by someone, usually another Mexican, one who is legally entered and who resents these newcomers who are rooting him out of his job. If a formal complaint is made, the Immigration Service goes through the formality of deportation proceedings, usually following a line called "voluntary" deportation. Otherwise the wetback is not molested.

It should be pointed out here that seldom in the history of a nation has so vast an army of people been so little wanted by the population of the nation into which the laborers are moving. The only two groups who want the wetbacks in this nation are the men who employ them and the state and federal officials who represent the employer group. Nobody else in Texas wants the wetbacks. In fact, almost all other people are strongly, and in some cases violently, opposed to their entry. In other words, out of the 7,000,000 people in Texas, it is quite likely that 6,950,000 are strongly opposed to this steady stream of people from the south.

Still they come.

The number of people of Spanish-Mexican extraction in the United States is not definitely known, nor will it be definitely known even after the 1950 census is completed. Best estimate for the number in the border states and states adjacent thereto is between 2,500,000 and 3,000,000. Of this number, about half are in Texas. That is, Texas has somewhere near 1,400,000 people of Spanish-Mexican extraction, the "Spanish" part being so small as to be a negligible factor. It is significant that approximately a million of these people have entered Texas since 1900. People think of Texas as a place that has always had a large Texas-

Mexican population, but, relatively speaking, it hasn't in the past.

The present flood of immigrants, starting in 1942 and 1943, has been steadily pushing the Texas-Mexican population northward in the state, and on to other states. Even some of the wetbacks who came several years ago, and who have learned to feel their way around, have been moving northward. Newly arrived wetbacks replace them just as they replaced the resident Texas-Mexicans, those legally entered.

Not all of this northward movement has been due to new immigration. Part of it was a by-product of the war; that early movement north helped create the demand for more cheap labor. During the manpower shortage of the war days, many Mexicans were admitted to industries from which they had been barred in the past, and this took them away from the farms and filling stations and ranches of Southwest Texas. Others who went to war refused to work again for the low wages paid in the border area, and moved north.

In some parts of Texas, particularly in the rich Lower Rio Grande Valley at the very southern tip of the state, wetbacks make up almost all the unskilled labor and a part of the skilled. The resident Texas-Mexicans, even in some of the skilled trades, simply could not withstand the economic competition of this army of hungry men willing to work at any wage.

During the past six years the results of this northward movement are noticeable in many parts of Texas, in such cities as Houston, Dallas, Austin, and Fort Worth. In those areas it is the Negro who is beginning to feel the economic pressure. Mexicans are taking his job. In restaurants, hotels, laundries, at road work, janitor work, truck driving, on countless other jobs, the Mexican is making his ap-

pearance throughout Texas, replacing the Negro.

And still the tide moves northward.

Where all this will stop is a question that will probably be settled on the basis of demand, certainly not of supply. Recent estimates place the population of Mexico at 24,000,000, an increase of one hundred per cent since 1900. Mexico is not able to feed her people. So much of the land in the nation runs at varying sharp angles to the horizontal that the earth's surface which can be tilled is restricted to such an extent that it will not feed such a population. There seems little prospect of any check in the population increase, since ignorance and the Catholic church combine to check any efforts at birth control. Only a highly developed industrial economy could make it possible for Mexico to feed her people in what would be considered a healthful, desirable manner. And Mexico's industry is in its infancy.

There is, then, a tremendous population pressure—and the pressure is northward, since the situation to the south is much the same as that in Mexico. An almost limitless supply of manpower, willing to work at any wage offered, is pushing against this nation's southern border. The current wage in the areas immediately adjacent to that border is from \$2 to \$3 a day, seldom more. It increases gradually as one moves northward. But there is this additional significant fact about the northward movement of the Mexican: as he moves, he depresses the wage scale. The wetback holds the wage along the border down to \$2.50 a day or less. The men he replaces hold down the wage level throughout Texas. These helpless, hungry little brown men are having a much greater effect than most people think.

There are people, particularly those who employ these Mexican immigrants, who contend that the wetback is for-

THE WETBACK TIDE

fortunate in being able to come to Texas and get work, even though he is paid no more than \$2 or \$2.50 a day. These people point to the much lower wage in Mexico and to poverty and hunger throughout that nation. The argument involves comparative evaluations of cultures so divergent that any number of positions could be defended to the satisfaction of those supporting them.

On one point there can be no doubt: we, as a people, are responsible for the conditions under which all of us, immigrant wetback or resident native, live. And there exists in the extreme southern part of this nation a tremendous foreign population living under conditions which simply cannot be reconciled with any American concept of the barest minimum of a decent standard of living. There is this further point on which there can be no valid refutation: there are developing in this same area complex social, political, and economic problems that will be with us when future generations are carrying on in our place.

We have deliberately brought about this situation.

Conditions under which a large percentage of the wetbacks in Texas live would seem incredible to most Americans. In the first place, the wetback is here illegally and he is frightened. He is afraid he will be deported; then his condition will be infinitely worse, since he probably sold everything he possessed, including his donkey and serape, to get enough money to come to the border.

Being afraid of his fellow man, both American and Mexican (it is the Mexican resident, fighting for his livelihood, who tries to get the wetback sent back to Mexico), the immigrant virtually lives in hiding. He may live in some little hut, or in a corner of a barn, or under some trees. If the wetback decides to stay in this country, he sends for his family as

soon as he can. They come, illegally, and move into the hut or the corner of the barn with him. Then relatives come and join the little group, always seeking out some human contact in this strange land. They too move in. Then they bring their families. Sometimes fifteen or twenty people are living in one small house—a house that would be considered unfit for even a small family.

If the wetback is ill, he seldom makes any effort to get a doctor. The doctor—assuming one could be induced to call on a wetback—might report him to the officers and the wetback might be deported. Occasionally an employer, interested in the wetback's labor, gives him some medicine, or maybe calls a doctor if the man appears to be in a bad way. The percentage of employers interested in the children of the wetback to the extent of securing medical aid for them in time of illness is probably not overwhelming. I do not know why it should be that way, but it is a fact that the business of being an employer often hardens one toward the misfortunes of those whom he employs. Perhaps it is inevitable.

Since he has no legal status, the wetback has no rights. If he is not paid, or if he is short-changed, he makes no complaint. To whom would he complain? The chances are he can't even count American money with any degree of accuracy. And in those cases where he is given some beans and coffee and corn by the employer, and perhaps a little medicine, he is utterly incapable of knowing what is due him over and above the charge for these items. He is the ideal victim for those desiring to victimize him—there are plenty of them.

The lot of the wetbacks who work under contract—and these make up the great armies of migratory labor that move from the Rio Grande northward through the cotton and beet fields—is perhaps a

little better. At such work there is a greater measure of security because the Mexican works under a labor contractor or boss, and this boss speaks Spanish. Furthermore, there is a certain element of security in numbers. In any large group there are always some who know what is going on, and who can help protect the rights of all, even against a chiseling labor boss.

As these armies of migrant Mexicans started moving westward and northward, their presence in many towns where there had been no Mexicans in the past was bitterly resented, and many tragic scenes ensued. The Mexicans were barred from the use of rest rooms, from stores, from moving picture houses—they were barred every place. The bitterness increased when waves of dysentery swept some of these towns when the Mexicans moved in. An astonishingly large number of Mexicans carry some of the various dysentery germs in their systems.

The most obvious evils of this situation were met, after a fashion, by labor centers, or camps, which were set up along the path of the migrant workers, largely with federal funds. The centers were administered by the Extension Service of Texas A. & M. College. Some genuine progress in human relationship was made in this work, the A. & M. men showing themselves to be enterprising, able, and sympathetic. But the federal funds have been cut off. Some of the camps—there were 63 at the peak—have been taken over by counties, some by cities, some by private individuals, some abandoned. Still the army of migrant laborers, largely wetback, moves on.

The wetback follows the crop across Texas, from south to north. Then he may even move on into another state. Then, with his carefully hoarded savings—maybe forty dollars, maybe even sixty or eighty—he may start back to his home-

land. And the climax of a situation that is basically tragic at its best comes all too often when this wetback crosses the Rio Grande with his money. For along the south bank of the river a pack of human wolves has assembled to prey on these unfortunates.

Bodies float down the Rio Grande at frequent intervals—always “unidentified” bodies. Far down in Mexico a family waits with that quiet patience the Mexican Indian learned centuries ago. Few others give the incident a second thought. There’s another wetback where he came from.

III

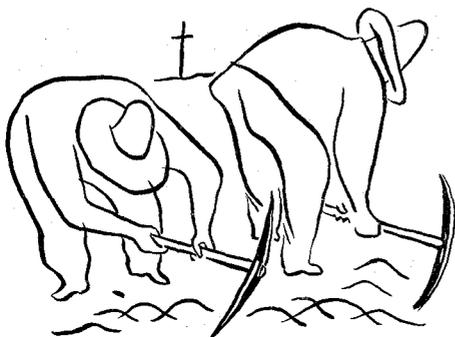
The story of the relationship between the Spanish-Mexican and the Anglo-Texan is one that still remains to be told in terms worthy of its graphic human drama. A pattern for the relationship was set in Mexico as far back as the first half of the 16th century, when the Spaniards made slaves of the Mexican Indians. In Texas today those Spaniards who have been able to establish themselves definitely in the minds of the Anglo-Texans as former Europeans, not former Mexicans, have been accorded an equality of a sort. The position of the Mexican in relation to the European has always been that of an inferior. It is that today.

The Mexican has been the cowhand, the cotton picker, the farm laborer, the janitor, the railway section hand, the shine boy, the waiter, the filling-station attendant. He has been the person to whom you could shout, “What’s wrong with you, you Mexican bastard?” without fear of consequences. He has been the person the Anglo-Texan could kill, even on the slightest whim, with full knowledge that nothing serious to the Anglo-Texan would follow. He has received about half the pay the Anglo-Texan has received for the same work. That condition has changed some, but not much.

THE WETBACK TIDE

Possibility of improvement in the overall picture has been bright at times, but with each improvement there has come the apparently inevitable wave of new immigration, and the cycle has been repeated. For instance, by 1908 the Texas-Mexican population in Texas had reached the point where the people at least had that small degree of security that goes with a condition of peonage on landed estates. The Texas-Mexican considered that he belonged to the patron, but in return he knew that the patron had certain obligations, extending to the care and feeding of the illegitimate children he had by the daughters of the Mexicans.

Then began the development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, coming at a time when Mexico was ready to launch into a series of violent revolutions lasting for two decades. Mexicans started streaming across the border. They cleared the



land and planted the crops in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Even at that early date they rooted out some of the native population, which started northward. From that day to this, the Lower Rio Grande Valley has acted as a sort of funnel through which have come successive waves of immigrants.

By 1929 the wave of immigration had reached its peak.

Then, during the depression years, when this nation no longer needed the Mexicans, the tide was turned the other

way—by force. An estimated 350,000 Mexicans were deported or voluntarily returned to their homeland. Some of the scenes were heart-rending to people who believe that someone with a different skin color is capable of suffering. Families were torn apart—parents taken away from children, husbands and wives separated.

In the ten years that followed, the condition of those Mexicans who remained improved. During the years immediately preceding the war and during the war, the rate of improvement was accelerated. In fact, a new day appeared to be dawning for the Texas-Mexicans. Thousands grabbed at a chance for a better life, economically and socially, by entering the armed services. There was violent complaint among the Anglo-Texans about the allotments to the wives of Mexican veterans “ruining” them—they even bought silk or nylon stockings! And there was no question but that many of these people tossed off their money in what they considered the best means of conspicuous display. Efforts to convince the Anglo-Texans, who bought Cadillacs, that it wasn’t actually criminal for a Mexican girl to buy a silk dress were of no avail. Still, efforts of the Anglo-Texans to check the steadily improving condition of the Mexicans were equally unavailing.

Mexicans were admitted to kinds of work that had been closed to them. Even along the border the darker of Mexican girls had never before been given a chance to work as waitresses in a restaurant serving Anglo-Texans, but now dark faces showed up in unexpected places, not only along the border but throughout Texas. Mexican children began going to school. Mexicans were admitted into labor unions, from most of which they had previously been barred. When Texas-Mexicans in the uniform of the armed services were barred from restaurants,

COMMON GROUND

barber shops, and other such places, scenes were created. The Texas-Mexican began doing what any people any place in the world must do if it is ever to achieve and maintain equality—he began demanding equality. And he began getting it. Public sentiment turned toward the Texas-Mexican in many cases, particularly those involving men in the armed services. Many of the “No Mexicans Allowed” signs were removed. In general, it looked as though the new day was here.

But the Mexican reckoned without the men who hire him. Employers along the border, and particularly in the tremendously rich Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, set out to force a change in immigration regulations so that Mexican laborers could cross. The Cardenas regime was over in Mexico, and the boom prosperity that was making a few people in that country rich was squeezing the peasant and laborer through the medium of inflation. He was ready to move out.

The employer group put on the heat. They had the staunch backing of their congressmen and senators. They notified Washington that unless they could have cheap labor to harvest their crops, the Valley would withdraw and let the nation lose the war. While most of the rest of the United States was struggling along harvesting its crops and getting the job done generally without importing cheap labor from some foreign land, the Valley convinced officials in Washington that it could not survive without such labor. It did this in spite of repeated reports of the U.S. Employment Service bureaus in the area to the effect that labor was available, if it was only used intelligently. What these Valley employers wanted was what the employer always wants—an expendable surplus of labor. They wanted to be able to set a “prevailing wage,” not have it set for them by labor.

The employer group won.

Word went down the line to immigration patrolmen that they were to ignore wetbacks actually at work on farms. They were to pick up only those they encountered on highways, or those who were formally reported to them. It was the opening wedge. From the tiny trickle of wetbacks that started in then has come the great flood of today.

Mexico tried to check the flow, at least insofar as Texas was concerned. Texas was placed on the blacklist for contract labor from Mexico because of discrimination in Texas against Mexicans. In order to have this ban removed, the governor of Texas, then Coke Stevenson, formed what he called the Good Neighbor Commission. Long before the Commission became active, great strides toward bringing about better understanding between the two groups in Texas had been made by the Office of the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which had set up an office in Texas. Once more it was federal funds which started a trend.

When the federal funds were no longer available, the Good Neighbor Commission carried on. Its able secretary, Mrs. Pauline Kibbe, held to the same policies set in the days when she worked for the Co-ordinator's office. But the war was over, and the wetbacks were coming, agreement or no agreement, and tempers had changed. Mrs. Kibbe spent too much time concerning herself with the business of wages, members of the Commission (one a large employer of wetback labor) thought. When she appeared at a hearing between Mexican and American officials at which a labor agreement of a sort was finally reached, and vigorously worked for a wage minimum of 37½ cents an hour instead of 25 cents (as favored by the wetback-labor employer member of the Commission), it was obvious that her days on the job were numbered.

The present secretary of the Commis-

THE WETBACK TIDE

sion, Thomas Sutherland, is a sincere, hard-working young man. He has done some fine work in going to areas where there are "incidents" and bringing about harmony. With the limited funds available, he carries on creditably. But there is no secret about the fact that the Commission now exists primarily as an agency for handling relations between the two nations on a much higher level—social interchanges, visiting dignitaries, etc., etc. The old urges and drives and objectives which made the office of the Co-ordinator group enthusiastic about their work have been officially abandoned.

Many of the gains made by Texas-Mexicans during the war have been lost as a result of the recent influx of wetbacks. And these people have brought new



problems, some of which are of a baffling nature. If an equal number of fair-skinned, English-speaking people—say around 300,000—living in a culture equivalent to that of the Mexican immigrant in his homeland were suddenly dumped into Texas, the social and economic and political upheaval would not

be solved for years. Add to that the two additional complications of language and color difference, and you have a situation that appears almost hopeless. In fact, there is little prospect that the Mexican in Texas will ever achieve anything approximating economic and social equality until conditions in Mexico change for the better. For it may be accepted as a definite fact that so long as low-priced Mexican labor is desired in this nation, legal barriers will not constitute a bar. And so long as the Mexicans who come here are people from a culture relatively untouched by the industrial era, then so long will the present condition in Texas endure.

IV

The problems presented to those sincerely interested in helping these people are tremendous. In the first place, most of the wetbacks are illiterate. In the second place, they are from a land where they have few rights. In Mexico they accept the inferior role in the presence of the rich, the official group, and the army group. Hence they are likely to accept exploitation and denial of simple rights as merely a part of life any place. Then, most of them are entirely unfamiliar with almost every aspect of our highly mechanized, so-called material culture. They do not understand the workings of a toilet, and endless irritation results from this. Their idea of sanitation is entirely different from ours in every way. So is their idea of health—they are likely to be frightened by doctors, to keep sickness and disease secret to avoid contacts with doctors.

Working and living as they do, they cannot bathe (an old Mexican-Indian custom which the Conquistadores and the early-day padres stopped), and the complaint of restaurant operators and other owners of businesses that they have a

COMMON GROUND

strong, unpleasant body odor is often true. An Anglo-Texan might have an even more objectionable odor under similar circumstances.

The list of things which cause irritation between the two groups is almost endless.

Then these newcomers are quite dark in color—darker in most cases than the Texas-Mexican already on hand, for the latter has a more generous mixture of European inheritance. Some of the wetbacks are as dark as many Negroes. Some are part Negro. In Mexico there is no ban on marriages between Negroes and members of other race groups.

The Texan, indoctrinated since childhood with a burning determination to “keep the Negro in his place,” is inclined to lump the Mexican Indian with the Negro. This intensifies his race prejudice. The Negro, on the other hand, resents the Mexican because the latter will work for less. The Mexican, looking for someone lower than himself, is delighted to find a still more downtrodden people, at least legally. So he snubs the Negro.

All is confusion.

In many ways the presence of the wetback presents a problem as serious as that handed the white people of the South when the Negro was freed from slavery. Here are a people who are theoretically free, yet they are definitely not so, and in the opinion of the Anglo-Texan they are incapable of existing as free people.

V

So little has been done, and so much of that negated by recent waves of immigration, that one viewing the picture with a clear eye is inclined to feel slightly ashamed at pointing to what might be termed improvements. Yet there have been some.

For one thing, segregation in the public schools of Texas is, at last, being broken

down. And again it was a federal agency, a United States District Court, that paved the way. In a decision rendered in June, 1948, Federal Judge B. H. Rice held that segregation of Texas-Mexicans was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the federal Constitution (apparently segregation of Negroes isn't), and ordered it ended. Dr. L. A. Woods, state superintendent of public instruction, has been putting the verdict into effect. As I write this, a hearing is in progress, one involving segregation at a border town. In the past, many dodges were used to get around the charge of open segregation in schools. They're not working now. The Mexican children can be kept in separate rooms (but on the same campus and in the same buildings) for the first year. That's all. That one year of segregation is permitted because of language differences.

This is a tremendous forward stride, and it is astonishing to note that in some areas the children of wetbacks are flocking to school, creating dismay on the part of school officials. For, like the wetback laborer, these children just don't exist officially. Still, there they are, in school.

These are encouraging aspects of the situation.

There are many others. Some educators have taken the lead in fighting for the rights of these people. Some churches are at last realizing that if they are to be worthy of continued existence, part of their obligation lies in the field of promoting brotherly love between all peoples, not the fair-skinned alone.

One of the most promising recent developments is the political emergence of the Texas-Mexican as an independent group. For a century the Mexican vote has been herded to the polls and cast in blocks by Anglo-Texan political bosses. That's still done in some South Texas counties—the present junior senator from

Texas, Lyndon Johnson, owes his seat to just such block voting, although in fairness it must be mentioned that his opponent, Coke Stevenson, was himself the beneficiary of that same vote in some previous elections. Now the Texas-Mexicans are developing leadership of their own, and as they do so, they are becoming the balance of power in many cities and may become a sort of balance wheel in state politics. They are rapidly moving into a position where they can bargain for their rights. Leadership among the group is developing. Gus Garcia, bright young San Antonio lawyer, who has represented the Texas-Mexican in many court cases, is an example. He is making the Texas-Mexican an independent, and very powerful, political factor in San Antonio. Some Anglo-Texans are becoming alarmed, fearing eventual control of a large part of South Texas by Texas-Mexicans. It's possible. Already in some border cities, such as Brownsville and Laredo, the Anglo-Texans have agreed to joint control in order to avoid complete rout.

There are still other encouraging aspects of the situation.

Many long-time resident Mexicans have been admitted into labor unions and are receiving more pay. They live under better conditions and are educating their children. These young people will furnish the type leadership the Texas-Mexican has not had in the past. For in the past only the Spanish-Texan was educated, and he never considered himself a part of the Mexican group. Far too often he was more keenly interested than the Anglo-Texan in keeping the Mexican downtrodden, for in doing so he made clear his own superior status. Now Mexicans are being admitted into colleges where they were discouraged, if not actually barred, in the past.

Official Texas—those who govern the state, whether at the capitol or at its

economic and financial centers—is still determined to maintain a white supremacy that excludes the Texas-Mexican, and particularly the wetback. But the reaction of Texas people by and large appears to be changing for the better. An illustration of this was furnished recently by the Felix Longoria case. Felix Longoria lived at Three Rivers, a small town near San Antonio. He was killed on the island of Luzon. Not long ago his body was brought back for reburial. The story of exactly what happened is slightly confused from there on, but on one point there seems to be no doubt: the widow of Felix Longoria definitely *believed* that the operator of the only undertaking establishment in Three Rivers did not want to have services for the dead soldier conducted in his chapel. After a bitter squabble, between the dead man's parents and his widow, as well as between people in all walks of life throughout Texas, the body of Felix Longoria was finally laid to rest at the Arlington Cemetery in Washington.

The significant thing here is not that the owner of an undertaking establishment did not want to conduct services for Felix Longoria, a Texas-Mexican. That merely follows a pattern. What is significant is that sentiment throughout the state was overwhelmingly against such a stand. Of course, this sentiment stemmed largely from the fact that Longoria was a war victim—a soldier killed while fighting for his country. But if the sentiment is genuine, one need not probe unnecessarily into its causes.

The Mexican who is in Texas today, and particularly the Mexican who has been here a long time and whose residence is legal, has a slightly better life than did the Mexican in Texas twenty years ago, just as the life of the Negro in Texas today is much brighter than it was twenty years ago. Whatever one may say

COMMON GROUND

to the contrary, race prejudice is on the decrease. But this Texas-Mexican has a long way to go before he can achieve anything approximating total equality.

As for the newcomers, that vast army of wetbacks, theirs is a heavy burden. Only an anthropologist, hardened to gazing upon the human scene with a time-space objectivity, or the man who employs wetbacks, can contemplate this dark tide without emotional reaction. For the present, there seems little hope for them.

With this article by Hart Stilwell, COMMON GROUND introduces a series of pieces analyzing the most immediate problems of Mexican Americans and outlining possible programs of action to deal with them. As Ernesto Galarza points out in his article on page 27, "The conditions of life and work of the Spanish-speaking minority in the United States are no longer a problem only of the borderlands"; their repercussions are inescapably national in scope. Yet here is a group about which too few persons outside the Southwest are informed and concerned, a group which so far has no national organization working to protect its rights. The very real progress made during the war years in giving Mexican Americans greater equality of opportunity with Americans of other backgrounds—through FEPC,

the manpower shortage, the Army—is currently being badly undercut by the "wetback" situation, which, by a process of economic chain reaction, is undermining the whole farm labor situation north from the Southwest. In this and succeeding issues, COMMON GROUND will spotlight this sore spot in American democracy on which too little national attention has so far been focused.

Hart Stilwell is a native Texan, some of whose ancestors were in Texas before Moses Austin, others for the war against Mexico in 1836. A graduate of the University of Texas, Mr. Stilwell is a freelance newspaperman, magazine writer, and author of several books. His novel, *Border City*, published by Doubleday in 1945, will have special interest for the readers of this CG series of articles: it deals penetratingly and sympathetically with the marginal status and exploitation of Mexican Americans in Texas in the early years of the war. Other books by Mr. Stilwell are *Uncovered Wagon*, a novel of early-day Texas, published in 1947 by Doubleday, and *Hunting and Fishing in Texas and Fishing in Mexico*, both published by Knopf. He is now finishing a novel dealing with the subject of academic freedom at a state university.

The illustrations in all four pieces of this group on Mexican Americans are by Miné Okubo.

CALIFORNIA AND THE WETBACK

CAREY McWILLIAMS

PERHAPS the mass round-up of aliens now being conducted on the West Coast can be explained by the belief—true or false—that a depression “is around the corner.” At any rate, the deportation campaign, starting around the first of the year, really got under way in April with teams of special agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service searching every Mexican settlement in Southern California for illegal entrants.

The stories of these raids are most revealing. On April 20, 12 border patrol inspectors, aided by local police, rounded up 382 Mexican nationals in Oxnard for deportation. “Starting at 4:30 a.m.,” the story reads, “officers combed the city picking men up off the streets, in labor camps, in apartments, hotels and trailer camps. Every local squad car was pressed into service to handle the record number of aliens. By 6 a.m. the City Jail was overflowing with 240 of the nationals and the remainder were kept in a citrus labor camp on East 5th Street.” Road blocks established on U.S. highway 101, near Montalvo, in the same locality, netted 128 aliens in one day. On April 12, 131 Mexican aliens were arrested in Los Angeles. On April 28, “raiding parties of Federal immigration agents arrested 100 Mexican aliens in Bakersfield in a series of raids last night and this morning. . . . In a similar raid at Delano, 20 immigration agents blocked off a 16-block section of the Delano Mexican colony and arrested 35 aliens in a house-to-house search.” On April 22, alien Portuguese

fishermen were arrested in San Diego; they had come from the Madeira Islands, to Costa Rica, and from there to California.

Why this sudden interest of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in illegally resident aliens? The round-ups are being staged, according to William A. Carmichael, district chief of the service in Los Angeles, because complaints have been filed that illegally entered aliens have formed “a cheap labor source to the detriment of jobless citizens.” An inspector in San Diego informed the press that “unemployed American tuna fishermen protested to Washington authorities that as many as 350 of their number have been displaced by nonresident aliens in recent years.” The pressure campaign to get the illegally entered aliens out of the labor market began immediately after the celebrated El Paso “incident” in October 1948, when the Immigration Service permitted thousands of Mexicans to swarm across the border (see *Hart Stilwell's “The Wetback Tide”* earlier in these pages). A week later the press carried a story to the effect that President William Green of the American Federation of Labor had made strenuous representations to Washington to get the illegal entrants out. The story carried the headline, in itself revealing, “Plot to Lure Mexican Workers to U.S. Charged.”

There is an all-too-familiar pattern about the current raids. The pattern is somewhat as follows: During periods of manpower shortage in this country, aliens