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The Border at War: World War II Along the United States-Mexico Border

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THE BORDER AT WAR: WORLD WAR II ALONG
THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER

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THE BORDER AT WAR: WORLD WAR II ALONG
THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER

by

WINIFRED B. DOWLING

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
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for the Degree of

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Abstract

The U.S.-Mexico border, especially the shared border of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, was in many ways transformed by the effects of World War II. This study examines change or continuity brought about by the war. The border region reflected many similarities to the national reaction to the upheaval of World War II. Yet there were dramatic differences as well. Examples of continuity and change are examined through the lens of border relations, labor and the economy, Mexican Americans, border women, and health on the border.

Wartime relations between El Paso and Juarez reached a zenith of good will and joint support. But most of the rest of Mexico exhibited continuing attitudes of indifference or sometimes hostility toward the United States. Organized labor reflected national efforts to better union workers’ lives. Yet otherwise, most El Paso workers, including salaried workers like teachers and nurses, earned wages that were significantly lower than national averages. The reputation of El Paso as a cheap labor city remained intact. Mexican Americans across the Southwest were victims of some degree of segregation and discrimination. Texas was the home of segregation on all fronts, except along the border. In El Paso, there was some upward mobility; for example, as much as 14 percent of the local College of Mines student body was Mexican American, compared to only 1.6 percent at the University of Texas at Austin. Nonetheless, most openings to social, economic and political power were unattainable by Mexican Americans in the 1940s. Significant change did not begin to come about until the end of the 1950s.

Job opportunities for women were not as widespread as elsewhere in the country. There
were no large defense industry plants to hire women workers, and El Paso remained classified as “sufficient work force” throughout the war. There were new opportunities for local women in “male jobs,” but most of these jobs were “for the duration” and reverted to the men as they came marching home. Both on the border and across the country continuity was very much a part of postwar life for women. Health in El Paso improved during the war years, as it did across the country. But the city’s mortality and morbidity rates remained abysmally high compared to national or even Texas averages.

This social history discusses a period of significant change for the border region and, at the same time, points up both the similarities and differences along the U.S.-Mexican border and patterns nationwide. Today, as well as during World War II, El Paso and Juarez experience both change and continuity that reflect national trends; yet both cities can be significantly different than the two nations they border.
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Conclusion

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Biographical Sketch
Introduction: The Border at War: the Transformative Power of World War II

This dissertation examines the major issues that confronted people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border during World War II, with special attention to the city of El Paso, Texas. My overall thesis is that in four short years World War II transformed social and economic relations along the border and began important trends that influenced border life long after the war was over. In particular, I focus on the fundamental changes that took place concerning border relations between Mexico and the United States, labor and the economy, Mexican Americans, border women, and health. I will examine events during the 1930s and the 1940s, especially the wartime period, to sketch out how trends in the border region were differed from or was similar to national events. El Paso, Texas, and its twin city of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, are the focus of my research. El Paso/Juarez was the largest of eight paired cities along the border in 1940, with the possible exception of San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Baja California. Since San Diego and Tijuana are located seventeen miles apart, many scholars do not consider them to be true border cities. In defining and understanding international borders, it is instructive to look at periods of upheaval and change. How much of the change that occurred on the border reflected that of the nation as a whole? How much was unique to the border? The United States needed Mexico for war materiel and for the assurance of a safe border. War or no war, what mattered was what the circumstances in the United States dictated. My dissertation uses a thematic approach to examine how the asymmetrical power and influence and the economic forces of the United States shaped the border before, during, and after World War II.

Most of the war-induced changes along the border lasted not just “for the duration,” but
some trends did not significantly alter the area for another decade or more. Public health continued to improve; Mexican Americans began to topple one wall of discrimination after another; the military continued to be an essential part of the border region’s economy. But during the war, women in El Paso were less likely than their counterparts nationally to take on nontraditional jobs and perhaps could only set the stage for future opportunities in “pink collar” jobs. The labor market eventually gave up on a dual wage system of “Anglo” and “Mexican” wages, but El Paso still had an economy based on cheap labor. Jobs in Juarez expanded, but so did the influx of immigrants from further south. The intimate and constant relations between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso were never again so intense as they were during the war. I will show how wartime exigencies broke down many barriers between the two countries, especially along the border. Nonetheless, these wartime-induced relationships did not necessarily reflect future ties.

Home Front Studies

Thousands of English-language books, articles, and essays have been written about some aspect of World War II, especially military history. A relatively small percentage of these have focused on the American home front, and none have thematically addressed what happened along the U.S.-Mexico border. Only a few Mexican historians have discussed the World War II era, and like their American counterparts they have scarcely mentioned the border.¹ The home front has been the focus of scholarly attention mostly since the 1970s. Among the various home front studies all authors agree that the war brought major upheaval and change. The

¹ World War II was not a major subject of Mexican history. Mexico declared war against the Axis in May, 1942 but was not a combatant (except for an air squadron and individual Mexicans who signed up for U.S. military service).
strongest debates have been about the degree of continuity and change, and the role of unity vs. disunity in American society. Especially contentious is the discussion about the role of women and minorities, and how much the war contributed (or did not contribute) to long-term changes in their status. The unity version emphasizes how Americans all pulled together, putting aside their differences to achieve victory over an evil enemy. It was the “Good War” of patriotic virtue and economic success. Disunity adherents emphasize the labor battles between unions and management, the political factions -- especially the turn toward conservatism in mid-war -- and the racism that kept discrimination in place and led to vicious riots in many American cities, including a brief one in El Paso. While El Paso and Juarez achieved a new degree of solidarity, the ethnic Mexican population in El Paso continued to be largely isolated and marginalized.

The early 1970s scholarly home-front studies tended to describe a Good War scenario; it was the era of the “new” social history -- a time of much interest in everyday people. Home-front studies amply fit the interests of the new social history -- the constructs of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. One group of authors, including Richard Lingeman, Richard Polenberg and Geoffrey Perrett, stressed the immense change that came with the war; Perrett, in particular, described a time when the United States was “strong, united, whole, happy and content as never before or since.” In contrast, John Morton Blum believed that continuity of institutions and values better characterized the home front.²

In the 1980s, home front historians began to delve more thoroughly into social conflict, women and gender, how minorities fared during the war, and the turn to the right in politics.

The nostalgia about a united America began to be tempered. While it was Studs Terkel in 1984 who asked whether it was indeed “The Good War,” most historians still agreed that the war brought unheard of and unexpected prosperity, that national confidence was shared by most Americans, and that there were new opportunities for some women and some minorities. The 1980s also brought a major change in women’s history. Joan W. Scott propounded the use of gender. Many women historians quickly took on that theoretical stance to look at women during World War II. Karen Anderson’s book, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II*, was one of the first to examine in depth the relationship between women’s participation in World War II and social change. Anderson challenged the notion that women’s opportunities in wartime led directly to the women’s movement a generation later. Most authors writing about home front women shared the view that continuity, rather than change, best described the wartime and postwar experience of most women.

By the 1990s, there was a distinct disillusionment with the notion of the Good War.

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Michael C.C. Adams insisted that mythologizing the war denied the horror that millions of people suffered and ignored the complexities that accompanied the war. Adams and several other writers and editors explored further those complexities. Among sometimes rancorous debate they questioned the World War II home front as a golden era. But other historians continued to emphasize the more triumphant interpretation. Author William O’Neill argued for something else -- to celebrate America’s accomplishments and not to focus on the theme of disunity. “Americans could be proud of themselves, not only for winning the war but, by and large, for the way in which they won it,” he wrote. Robert Kirk and William Tuttle imaginatively added children to the analysis in World War II historiography. Tom Brokaw wrote the immensely popular The Greatest Generation, arguing that the young Americans of World War II went on to build the strong country that became the leader of the western world. Several years later, Ken Burns orchestrated a Second World War seven-part series on PBS and also printed a companion volume to the series. Almost three generations after the war ended, home front studies continue to debate the degree of continuity and change brought about by World War II.

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Community Studies

This home front community study asks how border events confirmed or diverged from the nation’s experience. Books about specific cities or states began appearing almost immediately after the war. Many of these took a somewhat antiquarian approach, simply listing events, groups, political appointments, elections and so on with no attempt at analysis. Often these early works were paean to the patriotic selflessness of all concerned. Occasionally, a few achieved a more balanced approach of detailed history plus an initial analysis, like Karl Hartzell’s excellent *The Empire State at War*, published in 1949. Community antiquarian studies continue to appear, many sponsored by state governments, Chambers of Commerce, or historical societies.⁷

Academic community home-front studies only began appearing in the late 1970s. Some community studies encompassed an entire region, others a state, and still others a city. Among the most influential books on a region are two by Gerald Nash, *The American West Transformed* and *World War II and the West*. Nash posits that the western United States was transformed because of World War II -- that it transmogrified from a colonial dependency of the East Coast to a vital region generating its own growth -- economically, politically, and culturally.⁸ One of


the influential state studies was Alan Clive’s fine work on Michigan. Clive examined the extent of continuity and change during the war. While he recognized considerable changes in the economy, especially the larger role of unions and government, he also pointed to the perseverance of old ways and old ideas.

An excellent city study is Robert Spinney’s World War II in Nashville. Spinney saw much continuity in race relations and the power of Nashville’s elite, but he traced a completely changed attitude about accepting federal help. Heretofore, the South had been loath to have federal government “interference” because it could threaten the power structure and the South’s race relations. Spinney’s study illuminated some of the circumstances in the South during World War II and how it differed from other parts of the nation. The border offers a similar test case of what was different and what followed national or regional trends. For example, the worry about juvenile delinquency in El Paso was right in line with national concerns. But union activities in the city reached across the border attempting to achieve bi-national solidarity, something undreamed of in most of the rest of the United States.


Chapter One describes the extraordinary wartime relationships along the United States-Mexico border, especially those of El Paso and Juarez. The period remains unique in that Mexico’s participation in World War II and their vital mineral deposits mitigated somewhat the long-standing asymmetrical relations between the two countries. According to Oscar Martinez’ typology of border relations, the U.S.-Mexico alliance achieved its closest bonds — what Martinez characterized as interdependent — during the war years.\footnote{Oscar J. Martinez, \textit{Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands}, 14.}

There are only a limited number of books written about Mexico’s part in World War II. Despite the importance of Mexico’s contributions, especially its raw materials, the country in general did not become deeply involved in the vicissitudes of the war. The major works about Mexico’s involvement are Maria Emilia Paz’s \textit{Strategy, Security and Spies}, and two books by Stephen Niblo, \textit{War, Diplomacy, and Development} and \textit{Mexico in the 1940s}. In all three of Paz’s major subjects --defense, raw materials, and intelligence-- she was the first scholar to examine them in depth. In two significant works Stephen Niblo examined the wartime interaction between Mexico and the United States. Niblo showed how Mexico’s wartime support for the Allies accelerated industrialization and urban modernity in Mexico.\footnote{Maria Emilia Paz, \textit{Strategy, Security, and Spies: Mexico and the U.S. as Allies in World War II} (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Stephen Niblo, \textit{War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954} (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1995) and \textit{Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption} (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999).}

Other related works about wartime Mexico include studies of American diplomatic relations, the presidency of Avila Camacho, and political and economic relations between the U.S. and Mexico. Jesse Stiller’s book, \textit{George S. Messersmith, Diplomat of Democracy}, was about one of the most influential U.S. ambassadors in office from 1942 to 1946. The author described American diplomatic relations with Mexico during the crucial war years. In \textit{Red},
White, and Green, Michael Nelson Miller has written a fine description of the political and social policies of Avila Camacho’s presidential term from 1940 to 1946. Other works include Carmela Elvira Santoros’ dissertation on “United States and Mexico Relations During World War II” and brief descriptions of the war period by Oscar Martinez in Border Boom Town and Border People, as well as Paul Ganster and David Lorey in The U.S. Mexico Border into the 21st Century. 13

There are several books by Mexican authors which deal with the history of the country during the Second World War. The most detailed is Entre la Guerra y la estabilidad política: El México de los 40, edited by Rafael Loyola. Hector Aguilar Camin and Lorenzo Meyer devoted a chapter in this book to “The Mexican Miracle: 1940-1968.” According to the authors, the “Miracle” began in the war years when the country’s rich mineral deposits were deemed essential to the Allies. Josefina Zoraida Vasquez and Lorenzo Meyer wrote an important two-century history of Mexico facing the United States. They note that the contributions of Mexico to the war effort in World War II changed its relationship with the United States. The Allies needed Mexico’s railroads, mines, and oil. For the first time, the United States was courting Mexico. But, they write, there were and remain great economic and political power disparities between the two countries. 14


14 Rafael Loyola, Entre la Guerra y la estabilidad política: El México de los 40 (Mexico City: Grijalbo: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y Artes, 1990); Hector Aguilar Camin and Lorenzo Meyer, A la sombre de la Revolución Mexicana (México City: Cal y Arena, 1990); Josefina Zoraida Vasquez and Lorenzo Meyer, México frente a Estados Unidos: Un ensayo historico 1775-1988 (México City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1989; Jose Luis Ortiz Garza, México en la Segunda Guerra Mundial (Mexico City: Planeta, 1989); and Blanca Torres Ramirez,
Chapter Two on Labor and the Economy relates to the new labor history that concentrates on workers themselves, moving away from the institutional to the personal, from the grand narrative to the specific, from top down to bottom up. The “old” labor history had its emphasis on institutions, not on workers themselves.

The major wartime changes in job structure for El Paso males resulted from the Bracero Program’s indirect influence on local agriculture and union activities, especially those of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union. The Bracero Program, initiated in 1942 between Mexico and the United States, has attracted numerous scholars in many disciplines. Perhaps because it is encapsulated in time, is well documented by the two governments, and is a cross-disciplinary subject, many writers have tackled the issue. The Bracero Program reprises many themes: immigration, international relations, labor organization, agriculture and agribusiness. Although Texas had no bracero workers during the war, the very existence of the program affected El Paso’s agricultural economy, especially in terms of illegal workers. Nearly all historians of the bracero era agree that agribusiness greatly influenced and benefited from the Bracero Program. They also usually agreed that the U.S. government supported the Bracero Program in the interest of the growers.  

Along with the wartime Bracero Program and growing numbers of illegal immigrants during the war years came significant growth in labor union membership, both nationally and locally. The union activity in El Paso was especially meaningful for the Mine, Mill and Smelter

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Workers Union, which was part of the national Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Although not discussing El Paso specifically, Nelson Lichtenstein’s book on the wartime CIO was as an important contribution to labor history. Labor unions in the Southwest had to deal with a long history of anti-unionism. James C. Foster’s *American Labor in the Southwest, The First One Hundred Years* has three chapters about the wartime labor activism in Texas and other Southwestern states. The three chapters dealt with some of the CIO’s radical members, the anti-labor politics in Texas, and a chapter on Mine-Mill’s efforts to organize Hispanic workers. Other works by Clete Daniel, Mario Garcia, Frank Arnold, and Emilio Zamora describe wartime labor issues that include El Paso.  

Chapter Three deals with the discrimination that Mexican Americans experienced along the border and everywhere in the southwestern United States. The hypothesis is that World War II began the process of dismantling this widespread discrimination and segregation. A second hypothesis is that along the border, discrimination was somewhat muted. Nonetheless, in the border region there was discrimination of one kind or another against Hispanics, whether overt or subtle. It hampered countless activities of daily life and closed most doors to social, economic, and political advancement.

This chapter discusses segregation and exclusion of Mexican Americans in El Paso. It examines the spaces where Mexican Americans were refused service or admission, such as restaurants, parks, and swimming pools. Real-estate restrictions were not legally undertaken,
but there was a clear pattern of redlining; that is, local banks and insurance companies might choose to refuse loans or mortgages to Hispanics or blacks. Although there was no de jure segregation of Mexican Americans in El Paso’s schools, de facto segregation was alive and well. Crowded, largely segregated schools were one impediment to getting a good job, but just one of several factors, including constant in migration from Mexico, the wage differentials for Hispanics and Anglos, and job exclusion. Along the border, perhaps the most intractable dividing line was in employment. While World War II brought many changes to El Paso, Anglo power relations still held sway. By the end of the war, the effects of social discrimination had only begun to be modified.

Of the publications that treat some aspect of the Mexican American experience in World War II there is little that deals specifically with the border. However, there are several urban studies that partly focus on the border area during the war period. Some dissertations deal with Mexican Americans during World War II, but not on the border. Los Angeles is, indeed,


the major locus of World War II research about Mexican Americans. 20 A number of works deal with the effects of discrimination against Mexican Americans in Texas. 21 The war brought added tensions as well. Texas did not experience the riots against Hispanics that broke out in Los Angeles, but there were continuing incidents of discriminatory abuses. The significant changes that took place along the border because of World War II remain largely unexamined. A radio series and conference held at the University of Texas at El Paso in 1995 is a rare exception. 22

Chapter Four describes border women during World War II. The hypothesis is that women’s roles changed less on the border because of a strongly traditional Hispanic culture and a socially conservative Anglo culture. Unlike many other U.S. cities, El Paso had fewer job opportunities for women and thus fewer role changes, since there was a large low-wage Hispanic male labor force. Nonetheless, there were El Paso women taxi drivers, street car operators, newspaper reporters, radio newscasters, and truck drivers -- all areas in which a woman would

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scarcely have found employment before the war. But these “male” jobs in El Paso and across the country did not usually last beyond the war. Returning soldiers sought these jobs, and as Elaine May concluded, the end of the war brought the end of independent role models for women. El Paso, like much of the rest of the nation, reverted to restrictive gender roles. Postwar America was about domesticity and motherhood. In the literature of U.S. women in World War II little has been written about the experience of Hispanic women. Sherma Gluck and Vicky Ruiz did write about Mexican American women workers in California during the war. The University of Texas at El Paso’s World War II conference produced oral histories which included several Mexican American women from El Paso.

Most of the historians who wrote about wartime women agree that World War II did not bring permanent change to the status of women and that there tended to be more continuity than change. As Margaret and Patrice Higonnet argue, war does indeed bring opportunities for women in areas previously reserved for men. “But in a deeper sense the access to new roles is of no consequence,” they wrote. “War alters the vocabulary of feminine dependence, and it achieved improvements in the lives of some working women. In the long run, however, the dynamics of gender subordination remains as it was.”


25 Margaret and Patrice Higonnet, “The Double Helix” in Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars,
responsibilities, postwar roles for women in the late 1940s and 1950s mostly reverted to home and hearth. And no feminist movement immediately appeared to preserve and expand wartime gains. We can speculate that the temporary nature of new roles in wartime was one reason. Another may have been that wartime changes were often undertaken in the name of patriotism, not for individual benefit. When the war was over and patriotism needed no longer be invoked, social support for changes evaporated. After the war, men could step “back” into patriarch roles. At the same time, women retreated, thereby maintaining gender hierarchy.\textsuperscript{26}

Chapter Five discusses health along the wartime border. At the beginning of the war the nation had been through more than a decade of the Depression; the result was that fewer medical services were available per person in 1939 than there had been in 1929. Although federal public health funding had doubled in the 1930s, it was still only 22 cents per person per year.\textsuperscript{27} Despite these woeful conditions, the American Medical Association fought any governmental programs that would decrease the fee-for-service way of establishing income and independence for doctors.

In El Paso, fee-for-service was alive and well. Most private doctors served the Anglo population. The poor population of El Paso, mostly Hispanic, relied on the City-County Health Unit, Newark Hospital, or the City-County Hospital. Many sick people used whatever other alternatives they could find -- including patent medicine, home remedies, and curanderos (local healers).


\textsuperscript{27} Geoffrey Perrott, \textit{Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph}, 231.
faith healers). Although border health statistics improved during the war, they still remained appallingly higher than national rates of disease and death. Improved health statistics did not just depend on better medical care. Higher incomes bought more access to healthier diets and better care, while federal money significantly improved water resources and expanded care for patients who could not afford private doctors. Health care on the border reflected more change than continuity.

Few home front books or articles address the health status of Americans at home despite the enormous impact the war years had in the nation’s health. William Tuttle, the author of *Daddy’s Gone to War*, devotes a chapter to health and disease, concentrating on the annual threat of polio, but El Paso was scarcely affected by polio during the war years. Two other books, Gerald Nash’s *The American West Transformed* and Geoffrey Perrett’s *Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph*, both discussed health aspects during the war years, including the high rate of rejection for military service, the shortage of civilian doctors, and the improvement of nutrition fueled by high employment. Two important books skillfully describe the ravages of venereal disease. Allan Brandt looked at the effects of VD since 1880; John Costello in *Virtue Under Fire* specifically addressed the Second World War.  

Nationally-oriented medical histories scarcely mentioned the U.S.-Mexico border issues but give a broad picture of U.S. health during World War II. Wartime-era studies include John Coates’ *Preventive Medicine in World War II*, Fighting for Life: American Medicine in World War II by Albert Cowdrey, Morris Fishbein’s *Doctors at War*, and Frank Reister’s *Medical*

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Statistics in World War II. Rosemary Stevens has written two excellent books, *American Medicine and the Public Interest* and *In Sickness and in Wealth.*

There are few studies which touch on local health problems. Ann Gabbert has written a masterful dissertation on “local responses to global concerns,” but its time frame (1881-1941) scarcely touches the war. Another dissertation by Eva Ariel Carr described the work of Protestant missionaries in bringing better health care to Southside El Paso residents. Among the most useful primary sources were the City-County Health District’s annual reports. Some descriptive works include Alfonzo Ruiz’ book about health care on both sides of the border in *Celebrando 60 Años de Compromiso por la Salud Fronteriz*; Barbara Funkhouser’s *The Caregivers*, a non-academic history of medicine in El Paso; and several articles on World War II in the El Paso County Historical Society’s publication including “Medical Care in El Paso During World War II.”

The historical debate about the U.S. home front in World War II has evolved over the years. The notions of unity vs. disunity have changed significantly from the 1970s when

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historiography described the home front in mostly laudatory terms. Later, scholars recognized the disunity inherent in a rapidly changing world, especially labor conflict, the political turn toward the right, and continuing racism.

Over the years, historians have discussed the degree of change brought about in the World War II home front and, conversely, the sense of and desire for continuity. The border population reflected these dichotomies, sometimes reacting in a fashion close to national norms but at time being quite different in addressing both change and continuity. This signifies the distinctive placement of the border region in terms of transnational connections, migration, race, and class.
Chapter 1

U.S.- Mexico Border Relations

“De las democracias sera la victoria”

Examining international borders at a time of war -- that is, at time of extreme change -- can illuminate certain aspects of both nations. Some writers have viewed borders as peripheries that had little, if any, influence on national life. Others examine specific ways in which border relations and border life can influence national politics and indeed state formation. Still others argue that a border is a specific region that behaves differently than either nation that fronts the borderline. It appears that the U.S.-Mexican border relations during World War II best exemplifies the third case. Mexican interest in and attitudes about the war were heightened and more supportive along the border than in the Mexican interior. In many ways, the economic and political power of the United States most likely forced great changes or more significant reactions along the border. My hypothesis is that power and money shaped the border at any time--war or no war.

32 This was the sign on the first bracero train leaving El Paso for California, September 27, 1942.


The U.S.-Mexico border in the 1930s went through a time of tumultuous change. When national Prohibition ended in 1933, the impetus for Americans to cross the border regularly diminished. The Great Depression was already in full force, further draining Mexican border towns of tourist income. The early 1930s Repatriación forced many Mexicans back to their native country; historian Mercedes Carreras del Velasco estimated that 312,000 people returned to Mexico. Many repatriados stayed near the border, either because they lacked money to go further south or because they hoped for a chance to reenter the United States for work. Adding to the border’s woes, the Lazaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) decided to crack down on gambling and prostitution--vital moneymakers for the border region.

The end of Prohibition, the Depression, and the crackdown on gambling and prostitution had a profound effect on the U.S.-Mexico border. The border in the 1930s was still an isolated area--eight paired towns and small cities along a 2,000-mile stretch of largely arid land. There were more towns than cities, and most of the Mexican communities were smaller than their American counterparts. In international relations, although Cárdenas and Roosevelt personally admired each other, there were other strains, particularly because of Mexico’s nationalization of petroleum in 1938. However, on the eve of World War II, the United States desperately needed to improve its relations with Mexico. There were defense concerns early on, as the U.S. feared the Japanese might try to attack the western U.S. In addition, there were concerns about fascist-leaning groups and anti-American politics in Mexico. Mexico’s mineral

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36 Oscar Martinez descried particularly well the boom and bust cycles of the 1930s and 40s in Cd. Juarez.

wealth was a great incentive for the U.S. to build cordial relations with Mexico. Mexican labor would soon help agriculture and railroads deal with manpower shortages. Mexico, too, began pursuing more cordial relations with the United States. Politically, the Mexican government turned more centrist under the administration of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-1946). Mexico declared war on the Axis powers six months after the United States declared war, affirming its pro-Allied support.

On the border, U.S. consular reports repeated the good news about pro-American attitudes among the Mexican population, while those from the Mexican interior reported more pro-Axis feelings or general indifference. In Juarez and El Paso, there were goodwill relations between the mayors, military officers, and other officials of both cities. Tourism expanded rapidly, GIs poured their dollars into the Juarez economy, and American shoppers rushed to buy rationed goods available on the other side of the border. Relations were so positive that the two cities jointly celebrated national holidays like July 4 and the 16 of September. The reputation of Juarez as a “sin city” went through several permutations during the war years but was always vitally important to the city’s economy. Thousands of servicemen and thousands of other American tourists poured millions of dollars into a starved economy. The military brass struggled with various suggestions put forth or enacted to channel and control servicemen crossing the border. At one point, enlisted men could only go to Juarez for a maximum of four hours. In another period, only one percent of servicemen (just 300-400 men) stationed in El Paso could cross the border on any one day. Some El Paso citizens recommended closing the border early. None of these restrictive measures lasted long. Economic imperatives and the wish to keep good relations dictated a very open border for most of the war.

Another reason for easy crossings was the wish among many U.S. citizens to supplement
their rationing system with purchases of gasoline, tires, meat and sugar, items that were severely limited in the United States. On the other hand, border Mexicans were allowed to buy scarce products in the U.S., including dress shoes.\(^{38}\) Workers from south of the border scrambled for the better-paying jobs in the U.S. Many of them crossed legally as part of the bracero program, but many men came illegally, pushed by the need to support their families and pulled by growers who were looking for cheap farm labor. Especially in Texas, the number of undocumented workers grew throughout the war. Texas had an unenviable reputation for severe discrimination against Mexicans, and the Mexican government refused to allow braceros to work in Texas until 1947.

Texas undertook an effort to improve relations. Governor Coke Stevens established a Good Neighbor Commission in 1943 in an attempt to assuage Mexico’s exclusion of Texas from the bracero program, and he had the legislature pass a “Caucasian Race Resolution” which forbade discrimination against “Caucasians.” Both the resolution and the commission, however, called for voluntary changes in discriminatory practices and provided no legal recourse. In any case, the Texas border towns and cities were less likely to experience obvious discrimination. According to David Montejano, “Economically dependent on trade with Mexico and politically dependent on Mexican American voters, border city elites did not permit prejudicial expressions or practices which could antagonize their customers, clients, and voters.”\(^{39}\) And both sides of the border benefited from war-induced prosperity.

The relationship between the two cities perhaps reached its apogee during the World War II years. It was the kind of rapport that historian Oscar Martinez would characterize as


“interdependent.” Martinez has written extensively about the U.S. Mexico border. His study, Border People, created a theoretical framework that included international comparisons of borders around the world and the classification and characteristics of the people living there.\footnote{Oscar Martinez, Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juarez since 1848; Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 14.} He created a four-tier model of borderland relationships: alienated, coexistent, interdependent, and integrated. Martinez sees this model applying to borders around the world, although he uses the U.S.-Mexico border as his prime example. The alienated model means a border where there is virtually no cross-border reaction, not unlike the East/West German border that existed for forty-four years. Coexistent borders remain slightly open and minimal border stability can prevail. Interdependence enables border areas to carry on friendly and cooperative relationships; Martinez characterizes the U.S.-Mexico borderland as “a good example of strong asymmetrical interdependence.”\footnote{Oscar Martinez, Border People, 6-11.} The salient example of integrated borderlands is that of the European Union. His model is a very interesting and useful way of describing borders. The major drawback is that there is an implication that border relations improve over time. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

**U.S.-Mexico Border in the 1930s**

Well before the upheaval of World War II, there were major national events that shaped life on the border. In the 1930s the end of Prohibition, the Great Depression, the Repatriado, and the Cárdenas regime’s expropriation of foreign oil companies all caused constant change and sometimes turmoil. Nonetheless, border issues affected far fewer people since the area was...
much more lightly populated than today. For example, Ciudad Juarez, the largest Mexican city on the border in the 1930s and 1940s, had only 39,669 inhabitants in 1930 and 48,881 in 1940. Tijuana, now the largest border city, only had a population of 8,384 in 1930 and 16,486 in 1940. The border was a relatively isolated part of the United States and of Mexico. Few national leaders of either country were aware of activities or issues in the borderlands.

During President Roosevelt’s first administration, on December 5, 1933, the Twenty-first Amendment to the Constitution repealed the Eighteenth Amendment, which had ushered in Prohibition. In most parts of the country, that restored the sale of legal alcohol. The ending of Prohibition had a devastating effect on tourism to Juarez, which was already diminished because of the Depression. All along the border the number of annual crossings fell substantially, from 27 million in 1928 to 21 million by 1934, in the depth of the Depression. The traffic levels of 1928-30 were not equaled again until 1944.42

The financial problems of 1929-1939 were called the “Great” Depression with good reason. It was hardly just an American problem but a worldwide phenomenon. Of course, the border relations between El Paso and Juarez reflected these economic struggles. Juarez was floundering with the combination of the Depression and the severe loss of revenue once it was no longer a great destination for Americans seeking alternatives to Prohibition. The early 1930s were even more devastating for the border because of the repatriation of Mexican nationals. During the Depression pressure mounted to repatriate Mexicans who were considered to be competing with Americans for agricultural and other low-level jobs. The United States government weighed in with both pressure and legal means. In California, it is estimated that 30 percent of Mexican residents in the state were pushed or forced back to Mexico. In El Paso

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the U.S. Census told this story: the city’s population dropped from 102,421 to 98,804 from 1930 to 1940.\textsuperscript{43} As Mercedes Carreras described the 1920s (before the Repatriacion and the Depression), many U.S. employers, especially in agriculture, imported cheap Mexican labor with the notion that “like swallows they would always return home.”\textsuperscript{44} Once the Depression began, Mexicans were seen as thieves of jobs and welfare benefits, and the effort was made to deport them. Carreras declared that 312,000 people returned to Mexico, 20 percent of the Mexican-origin population in the United States at that time. Others have estimated the number of returnees to be as high as half a million or even more. Both informal and more direct “push” factors drove Mexicans across the border. Some were citizens of the United States but chose to remain with their families returning to Mexico.

Mercedes Carreras points out that there were “pull” factors as well. The Mexican government made a valiant effort to welcome back their countrymen. It helped pay for and sometimes organized the return trips. It offered some repatriados opportunities to colonize vacant land. With this welcome came was the hope that many workers returning from the United States would bring new skills to their homeland. But it was during the Depression, and the Mexican government was hard pressed to help their returning population.

On the border, both sides struggled to deal with factory closings, bank failures, rapidly rising unemployment, lowered wages for those who still had jobs, increased welfare rolls, and much greater pressures on charitable organizations. To add to these woes, the Mexican government launched an anti-vice campaign in 1934. The El Paso Herald Post reported, “Gone are the hundreds at the saloons, the downtown honky-tonks and brothels, and the open

\textsuperscript{43} Oscar Martinez, \textit{Border Boom Town}, 89.

\textsuperscript{44} Mercedes Carreras del Velasco, \textit{Las Mexicanos que devolvio la crisis}, 1929-1932.
gambling.” Despite these Mexican government efforts, “vice” remained persistent and was back in full force again a few years later.

Nationally, President Roosevelt considered Lazaro Cárdenas as “one of the tiny group of Latin leaders who was actually preaching and trying to practice democracy.” Nonetheless, there was a great deal of resentment in Congress and in the American press about the expropriation of landholdings and in March, 1938, the nationalization of foreign oil companies. The United States retaliated by boycotting Mexican oil. Subsequently, the Germans moved in to buy up a substantial portion of Mexico’s petroleum. Eventually, this set in motion the U.S. actions toward reconciliation with the Mexican government.

Lazaro Cardenas was President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940. Virginia Prewitt, a reporter stationed in Mexico, characterized the early Cárdenas regime as assuming a sharp leftward swing, attacking capitalism and the oil companies. But international and internal pressures led him to a more moderate stance, especially toward industry. Cárdenas did not become conservative, but certainly his handpicked successor, Manuel Avila Camacho, filled that description. With the onset of war in Europe, much was about to change in U.S.-Mexico relations. The rather prickly connections between the two countries would turn into a strong partnership. Particularly along the border, this mutual relationship probably was the strongest in the history of the two countries.

**The Sexenio of President Manuel Avila Camacho**

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When Avila Camacho announced his candidacy in 1940 he represented what became the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party); it was at first assumed that he would continue the more left-wing attitudes of President Cárdenas. It was a contentious, sometimes violent, election against the right-wing opposing candidate, General Juan Almazán. However, there were signs that Avila Camacho’s left-leaning commitments were not strong. The final two years of the Cárdenas administration had already clearly illustrated a movement to the center. Cárdenas himself chose Avila Camacho, then his Secretary of Defense, as the official candidate. However, Avila Camacho had shown signs of leaning more toward the right; during his campaign he confirmed that he was creyente (a believer). This was a clear distinction from Mexicans who were Catholics by background, but not active participants in the Catholic Church. He was the first leader since the Revolution to publicly acknowledge that he was a practicing Catholic. According to Michael Miller, “Cárdenas picked a man who had faithfully served him, had a military background, was a moderate, a Catholic, and had the pragmatic, centrist political philosophy Cárdenas believed that the nation needed.”

American diplomats were concerned about the presidential elections. One consul in Baja California reported that the political contest was between a socialist candidate and a conservative. In his regular dispatch to the Department of State Horatio Moors wrote, “It appears at this time [January 1940] that all local substantial Mexicans that are holders of property and real assets are realizing that a regime under General Camacho would prove contrary to their personal interests and be largely devoted to the application of purely socialistic philosophy. They are equally convinced that a more sober and conservative period of

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presidential influence would result were Almazán to be elected.”⁴⁹  U.S. Ambassador Josephus Daniels was more astute, but he was concerned about the upheaval of election year: “It is felt that an armed revolution can be considered a possibility in Mexico during 1940,” he reported. Daniels cited the issues that he felt could cause an uprising: The high cost of living, the poor financial situation of the government, the depreciation of the peso [from two pesos per dollar to six pesos], the decrease in exports, the oil company disputes, and the increase in taxes. “It is the writer’s opinion that whoever becomes the next President of Mexico, the Administration will turn to the right.”⁵⁰

On December 13, 1940, Avila Camacho was sworn in, and a new era in U.S.-Mexico relations was formally underway. Both countries took steps to forge a relationship that grew stronger as the war progressed. By mid-1941 they were working out one of the largest bone of contention, that of the oil appropriations. On November 19, 1941 -- just seventeen days before Pearl Harbor -- they reached a settlement. Mexico pledged a preliminary forty million dollars to the U.S. oil companies, and the United States agreed to provide Mexico with ninety-five million in economic aid. Significantly, the United States, in July 1941, had already agreed to buy Mexico’s entire exportable minerals output.⁵¹ The more right-leaning Mexican government conformed with the American political scene in the early 1940s, as there was a distinct turn toward the right in the U.S. Congress. The Mexican and American political mood seemed to suit each other.

⁴⁹ Report from Horatio Moors, American Consul in Mexico, Baja California, 16 January 1940, RG 59, 812.00/30918, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵⁰ Report from Josephus Daniels, Ambassador, to the Secretary of State, 2 February 1940, RG 59, 812.00/30927, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵¹ Jesse A. Stiller, George S. Messersmith, Diplomat of Democracy, 173.
In terms of support for the war, Mexico was a huge and vital supplier to the Allies. The strategic materials it supplied, especially copper, lead, zinc, mercury, antimony, tungsten, and rubber, poured into the United States.\(^{52}\) Mexico also supplied important amounts of oil, agricultural products, and fibers to the war effort. The deteriorating state of the Mexican national railroad system caused problems in the delivery of such items to the U.S. Already in poor condition before the war, the railways struggled to deliver the huge and heavy supplies northward to the United States.\(^{53}\)

Mexico was just climbing out of the Depression and was struggling to provide for its own people as well. As Pauline Kibbe, member of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, put it so movingly, “Unless the economic level of the peasantry is raised, the Mexicans will remain subject to the hazards of hunger and cold, bad and unbalanced diet, overcrowded dwellings, and subsequent epidemics.”\(^{54}\) As Stephen Niblo described peasant life, “It was a world without clocks, calendars…newspapers, books, electricity or appliances.”\(^{55}\) But war was about to change the old way of life. Although Mexico took many steps to support the United States after Pearl Harbor, it did not officially declare war on the Axis until June, 1942. What precipitated its decision were German submarine attacks on Mexico’s shipping. On May 14, a German submarine sank the oil tanker Portrero del Llano with the loss of five crewmembers. A week later a German U-boat attacked another tanker, the Faja de Oro with a loss of seven men.

Mexico’s war declaration was, as historian Josefina Zorada Vásquez noted, the first time Mexico

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and the U.S. became allies.\textsuperscript{56}

El Paso’s local newspapers were full of articles about Mexico’s decision to enter the war. On May 22, 1942, the \textit{Herald Post} announced that President Avila Camacho was preparing for an expected declaration of war. Juarez was already planning a war parade for two days later.\textsuperscript{57} The procedures for declaring war included several steps, beginning on May 22 and culminating finally on June 15 at the Senate. The President reiterated that Mexican troops would not be sent outside the Western Hemisphere. Except for an air battalion sent to the Philippines in 1945 that remained the case. The war brought to Avila Camacho extraordinary powers granted by Congress. It was a “political windfall of the first magnitude… enabling him to emerge from ‘the great shadow’ of Cárdenas.”\textsuperscript{58} It enhanced his reputation and power as the leader of a nation at war. One of the first steps the government took was to deport a group of Germans and Italian nationals and to arrest hundreds of Japanese, including some in Juarez, and send them, at least temporarily, to interment camps.

Politically, President Avila Camacho took steps to successfully unite the country. He appointed his predecessor in office as Secretary of National Defense. He and General Lazaro Cárdenas remained friends, and Cárdenas’ reputation only enhanced Avila Camacho’s administration. Under the aegis of wartime demands, he was able to solidify his power and control over both left and right factions. Labor followed willingly, as did others on the Left. They were especially influenced by the entry of the Soviet Union on the Allied side in June 1942, after Hitler invaded Russia. Throughout the war, Labor was willing to make wage

\textsuperscript{56} Josefina Zorada Vásquez, \textit{México frenta a Estados Unidos}, 185.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 22 May, 28 May, 29 May, 30 May, 1942.

\textsuperscript{58} Stephen Niblo, \textit{Mexico in the 1940s}, 115, 111.
concessions and curtail strikes. The Right was happy to support the pro-business policies of the government. In September 1942, Avila Camacho hosted a remarkable assemblage of all of the country’s former presidents. These men represented “antagonisms, rivalries, conflicts, and violence going back to the early days of the Revolution,” according to Michael Nelson. “Yet they stood together on the balcony of the National Palace and called for Mexicans to form ranks with them and unite with the world in the struggle against fascism.”

The U.S. relationship with Mexico continued to improve. The new Ambassador, George Messersmith, had a completely different personality than his predecessor, Josephus Daniels, but both did exceedingly well in dealing with the Mexican government. Messersmith served from 1942 to 1946 and in that time expanded the embassy so that it became the largest U.S. embassy professional staff in the world. Most of all, his range of contacts, both within and without the government, supported the ever growing relations between the two countries.

It was Messersmith who arranged the historic meeting between Roosevelt and Avila Camacho in 1943. Only once before had there been a presidential bilateral meeting; that took place in El Paso in 1909 between William Howard Taft and Porfirio Diaz. This time, in April 1943, the two presidents met first in Monterrey and then in Corpus Christi, Texas. All was cordiality and Good Neighbor salutations. *Time Magazine* described their meeting as speeches “filled with Good Neighborliness, but nothing much else.” But the fact that the Mexican and U.S. presidents personally met as wartime allies was significant in itself. The El Paso newspapers eagerly followed the proceedings. The *Herald Post* exalted, “The visit marked the

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61 *Time Magazine*, 3 May 1943.
acme of good neighborliness and cooperation between the two republics.” The El Paso Times was equally positive: “President Avila Camacho proclaimed Mexico as a natural bridge between Latin and Saxon cultures. If there is any place where the thesis of good neighbors should work, it is along the Rio Grande.”62 Later that year, the Second Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City wrote with satisfaction: “It is encouraging to note that, almost for the first time in history, there are virtually no serious problems outstanding between the two Governments. A foundation has been laid, largely since the war started, for frank and realistic relations in the future.”63

The increased rapport with Mexico was not only political. Tourism soared as travel was restricted in so much of the world at war. Mexico and all of Latin America was a beacon for American travelers who could afford it. Naturally, the easiest access from the United States was to Mexico. Mexican films and film stars, artists and architects all attracted much attention. The industrial and export boom was noticeable everywhere. By 1943, ninety percent of exports were being delivered to the United States.64 Mexico was becoming America’s number one supplier of strategic materials. As R. A. Humphreys has noted, “Exports of minerals, always the dominant export, increased by more than fifty percent; exports of cattle, food products, fibers, timber, leather, cotton goods, and sugar increased in some instances as much as five hundred percent.”65

While government officials and businessmen were acquiring closer and more positive

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63 Summary of Conditions in Mexico from September 15 to November 30, 1943, to the Secretary of State, 26 November 1943, RG 59, 812.00/32224, National Archives, College Park, MD.

64 Josefina Zorardo Vásquez, México frente a Estados Unidos, 187.

65 R.A. Humphreys, Latin America and the Second World War, 48.
relationships with the United States, that was not necessarily true for Mexicans in general. Jesse Stiller summarized, “A century of rancor could not be expunged overnight.” Despite Mexico’s support on the side of the Allies and the enthusiastic pro-Americanism along the border, “public opinion in Mexico didn’t share the official enthusiasm for collaboration with the United States.” The ill will held by Mexicans was not just from the past. Throughout the war, many people suffered hard economic times and food shortages. The rural and urban poor were being especially marginalized by the growing economy. There were particularly hard times in 1943; in September of that year food riots broke out in Durango, and food shortages were common in other sections of the country.

Edward M. Pooley, the editor of the El Paso Herald Post, traveled to Mexico City in August 1943 and write about the lack of food. He began his description of the trip, “Mexico today has more money and less food than ever before in her history. One day last week there was no rice in the stores in many sections of Mexico City, corn was being rushed to the city and beans were rare.” Pooley also noted that the prices of staples like beans, corn and rice had doubled in price since 1940 but wages have not kept pace. Things were particularly bad in 1943 because there was a drought, but the American war needs had also caused part of the problem. Farmers had shifted their bean or corn fields to other more lucrative crops. Also, the American government was not always quick to respond to Mexico’s food crisis, reported

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66 Jesse H. Stiller, George S. Messersmith, Diplomat of Democracy, 175.
67 Josefina Zorada Vásquez, México frente a Estados Unidos, 184.
68 Michael Nelson Miller, Red, White, and Green, 30.
69 El Paso Herald Post, 24 August 1943.
Ambassador Messersmith.\(^70\) The food shortage and high prices continued in 1944. The July 1944 issue of the magazine *Mañana* wrote that prices were high “because the *gringos* were taking so much production for the war effort, but the government, labor, the Left, and the United States all worked to deny the obvious.”\(^71\)

U.S. diplomats believed that the Mexicans were too quick to blame America whenever there were problems. A Secret Résumé of Dispatch from the American Embassy discussed the “Tendency to blame the U.S. for Mexico’s Plight.” The writer, Second Secretary Guy Ray, assured the State Department that “the attitude of the press in the past two and a half years [since Pearl Harbor] toward the U.S. has been uniformly favorable. In spite of this friendly attitude, one of the favorite pastimes in the market place, in cafes, among taxi drivers, etc. is general criticism of the “gringo” and explanations of why high prices, scarcity and so forth are the fault of the U.S.”\(^72\) The embassy official might have downplayed the conditions in Mexico. Another U.S. diplomat in Mexico City reported several months earlier that there was an “acute shortage of food and fuel in several parts of the Republic. The food situation throughout the Republic, as far as the working class is concerned, continued to be bad.”\(^73\)

While the working class was struggling during the war, the other economic news for Mexico was more positive. The country’s economy was increasing by two percent annually, not necessarily an impressive figure, but better than what Mexico had been experiencing in the

\(^70\) Jesse H. Stiller, *George S. Messersmith, Diplomat of Democracy*, 198.

\(^71\) Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 123.

\(^72\) Secret Résumé of Dispatch No. 18118 from American Embassy, 9 June 1944, RG 59, 812.00/32399, National Archives, College Park, MD.

\(^73\) Summary of Conditions in Mexico, January 1944, to the Secretary of State, 16 February 1944, RG59, 812.00/32257), National Archives, College Park, MD.
There were many signs that the country was progressing towards its goals of becoming a modern, urban, industrialized society. The face of Mexico was rapidly changing. The number of paved roads almost doubled from 1940 to 1945—from 9,900 kilometers in the entire country to 17,400—still a very limited road system. Despite wartime restrictions the number of motor vehicles rose from 168,000 to 205,700 between 1941 and 1946. Ten years later, motor vehicles had nearly tripled.\textsuperscript{75}

Although this shift began late in the Cardenas administration, it was President Avila Camacho who pointed Mexico toward this modernization project. It meant a turn to the right as the economy moved toward private capital. “His ability to shift the political agenda so dramatically in a more conservative direction without precipitating rebellion was, in a broad sense, linked to Mexico’s involvement in the war effort.”\textsuperscript{76} An \textit{El Paso Times} headline in June 1944 proclaimed, “Elaborate Scheme for More Industry in Mexico.” The article described the formal agreements between the two countries for both wartime and the postwar industrialization of Mexico.\textsuperscript{77} The war-induced improvement in U.S.-Mexico relations was remarkable. One small but significant act was the participation of a Mexican air force squadron which served in the war. Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla had already privately pushed forward the idea at the April 1943 meeting between Roosevelt and Avila Camacho. In July, Padilla told Ambassador Messersmith “that it was not consonant with Mexico’s dignity and her place among the United Nations that her army should not bear a part of the sacrifice.” Both presidents were in

\textsuperscript{74} Michael Nelson Miller, \textit{Red, White, and Green}, 182


\textsuperscript{76} Stephen Niblo, \textit{Mexico in the 1940s}, 362.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{El Paso Time}, 13 June 1944.
agreement, and in July 1944 the 201st Air Squadron of 300 men was dispatched to San Antonio, Texas, for training. When the men completed their preparation, the graduation ceremony was “one of the most elaborate held in honor of flying graduates.”

By the end of the war, much had changed in Mexico. The war had brought prosperity to some, especially industry; mining and production had expanded, and both braceros and illegal workers in the United States sent welcome dollars home to Mexico. The shift from rural to urban life and from artisans to factory workers only intensified under Avila Camacho’s successor, President Miguel Aleman.

**Sinarquismo**

The United States kept a wary eye on Mexican internal political developments, including the rise of Far Right groups that had fascist sympathies or anti-American sentiments. The United States was anxious to have a secure border and to have access to Mexican goods, and the very conservative groups were seen as disruptive to these aims. The Far Right was taken very seriously in wartime Mexico as well. The strongest of these groups were the Sinarquismo movement and the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). PAN eventually became the opposition party in Mexico, but when it was founded in 1939, many viewed the party “as tainted by its sympathy for Almazán, Franco, and fascist theories.” The Sinarquistas began in 1937 and scarcely lasted a decade. But in their short life they caused consternation in Mexico and especially among American and British officials and the American press.

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78 *El Paso Times*, 18 February, 1945.

Sinarquismo means “without anarchy,” but it was an organization dependent on military display. Many Mexicans were convinced that Sinarquistas were fascist. But contemporary leftwing observers, John Bright and Josefina Fierro de Bright, had perhaps the best description of the organization’s character. They saw the Sinarquistas as fascist in the broad political sense, but “it would be an error to assume all members, or even a majority, were fascists of the stripe of the Falangists of Spain.”

French historian Jean Meyer thought that the high point of Sinarquismo came in 1940 and 1941, only three and four years after its founding. The Union Nacional Sinarquista (UNS) declared itself a movement (not a political party) of “unity and salvation that wanted to save the country from the Revolution, from the Bolsheviks, the ‘gringos’ of the north, from Masons, protestants, and Jews.”

Certainly they were anti-democratic; it was their assertion that men are by nature unequal and unfit for self-rule. They were fervently pro-Catholic, which of course ran counter to Nazi doctrine. But they resembled Nazis in their use of parades, banners, and uniforms. “They called their members ‘soldiers,’ they received military training, give a fascist salute, march tirelessly around the country.”

It is difficult to know exactly who the leaders were. As Harper Magazine contributor Margaret Shedd wrote, “The Sinarquist organization is authoritarian and highly centralized; it requires blind obedience on the part of its members; the element of secrecy is so great that even leaders require secret countersigns in order to recognize each other.”

80 John Bright and Josefina Fierro de Bright, Prospectus for the Office of Inter-American Affairs, 10 November 1942, RG 229, 1717, National Archive, College Park, MD.

81 Jean Meyer, El Sinarquismo: Un Fascismo Mexicano? (Contendido, Mexico City, August 1979) 113.


Abaca was the nominal leader from 1939 to 1941, followed by Manuel Torres Buenos in late 1941, there was a secret leadership that held most of the power. A number of different men have been cited as the behind-the-scenes leaders. The strong Catholicism of Abaca and probably the majority of UNS members meant that, although the Church was not officially behind the Sinarquistas, many clergy were very supportive.

The movement apparently was influenced by Nazis. Margaret Shedd observed, “Sinarquismo was organized by a group of privileged and very religious young men, under the aegis of a German professor at the University of Guanajuato. Most were sons of good families, some were Falangists. One had just come back from fighting for Franco in the Spanish civil war. The professor not only advised them but got them funds from local Nazis.”84 A report from the Office of Strategic Services commented, “The Sinarchists, like the Nationalist movements elsewhere, preach the fuehrer prinzip. They detest democracy and try to substitute a feeling of mystic exaltation for political responsibility -- in many cases with great success, particularly among superstitious and fervent peasants.”85

In 1941, after the visible jefe, Salvador Abaca, was forced out, he was replaced by Manuel Torres Buenos. Buenos immediately disavowed support of Axis Governments. But the Sinarquismo movement began to lose its unity, with apparently little reconciliation between the supporters of Abaca and those of Buenos. The schism seemed to mean that the organization could never recover. It is difficult to know how many Sinarquistas there were, but it is generally agreed that at its height, the organization claimed at least half a million adherents;

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84 Margaret Shedd, “Thunder on the Right in Mexico,” 418.

85 Office of Strategic Services, Report Concerning the Sinarquist Movement in Mexico, 16 August 1943, Department of State, Division of the American Republics, RG59, 812.00/32185, National Archives, College Park, MD.
some historians have estimated as many as a million. It was certainly the largest political group after the official PRI party of Avila Camacho. “Despite continued Mexican protestation that there was no real danger from Mexican fascism, the level of concern in Washington and the American press remained strong throughout the war.”

For example, the State District Attorney General in Laredo, Texas, Philip Kazen, submitted a report to the Department of State about “The Sinarquista Movement in Mexico” in March, 1942. He quoted interviews with many Mexican leaders with mixed opinions about the movement. According to his report, the previous titular head of the movement, Abasca, was interviewed by Hoy Magazine for the December 1941 issue and declared his belief that Franco was a great patriot and that Hitler was the salvation of the world sent by God to destroy the heathen Communists. Kazen concluded that “we as Americans should do nothing to aid the movement or give it prestige, for since the movement is based on strict obedience and discipline, at a moment’s notice it can become a very dangerous instrumentality should the leadership fall into unfriendly hands.”

The Mexican government was not lax in awareness or control of the Sinarquistas. In early 1940, politician Felix Diaz was already asking for the dissolution of the “subversive” Sinarquista. Early in 1941, leftists within the official party began a propaganda campaign against Sinarquismo which was to last for some years. The focus of these efforts was to identify Sinarquismo with Fascism. By July 1941, President Avila Camacho attacked the “divisiveness which Sinarquismo presented to the nation. Any further public demonstrations by the UNS were prohibited unless prior permission of the authorities was obtained.” On December 4, 1941 -- three days before Pearl Harbor -- “a group of 172 Mexican senators and

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deputies organized themselves as the National Anti-Sinarquista Committee….They denounced Sinarquismo as counter-revolutionary aiming to restore the situation prior to 1910, and as fifth columnists following the lead of the Spanish Falange.  

But despite the government action and its own polarization and leadership problems, Sinarquismo remained in a diminished capacity for a few more years. Certainly there was a measure of violence connected with Sinarquismo rallies and other events. Despite their protestations of peaceful intentions, there was the ever-present military emphasis in Sinarquismo and its anthem was entitled, “Faith, Blood, Victory.” The first five years of Sinarquismo was a time of rapid growth, and the public persona of deputy jefe, later Supreme Jefe, Salvador Abaca was the main focus of attention. The personal asceticism and mystical character of Abaca may have had a great influence on the initial growth of the UNS. But the participation of Mexico in the war effort seemed to blunt the fervent anti-American, sometimes pro-Axis attitude of Sinarquismo.

After Abaca was pushed aside, the former Jefe took on a colonizing effort in Baja California. But only a few hundred people joined the colony, and it was eventually an abortive effort. Abaca seemed to have brought his Supremo Jefe habits to this small community. “He completely dominated the legislation, judicial and executive power of the colony. Furthermore, he prescribed the habits and activities of the colonists: Every person had to make the sign of the cross and pray an Our Father before and after each meal, every family had to say the Rosary together at least once a day, everyone had to be in bed by 10 o’clock, dancing was strictly forbidden, and no pocho words (Anglicized Spanish) were allowed to be uttered.”

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89 Kenneth Prager, “Sinarquismo,” 322.
Sinarquismo in the United States

Sinarquismo did cross the border to involve Mexicans living in the United States. Although at least one author claims that there were 50,000 Sinarquista members in the United States, a more credible estimate is merely 3,000 members. Part of the recruitment problem was that only Mexican nationals were accepted. But perhaps more influential was the lack of enthusiasm by Mexicans in the United States to espouse such a conservative and rigidly hierarchical organization. Sinarquismo in El Paso flowed across the river from Ciudad Juarez. As a stronghold of the Revolution, the movement did not gain much traction in the state of Chihuahua. But its significance lay in its geographic location as a vital link to el México de afuera [Mexicans who lived outside Mexico]. The El Paso area became one of the four largest regional groups in the U.S. in addition to Los Angeles, McAllen in South Texas and Bakersfield in central California. While Sinarquismo was established in the United States in 1937, it was always a fringe group. Anti-Americanism was deflected after the U.S. went to war and Mexico followed suit.

A jefe in El Paso in early 1942 denied any connection with Fascism and proclaimed their friendship with the United States, even though one of the original tenets of the movement was animosity toward the U.S. Sergio Arriola declared, “Sinarquist ideals are pure because they are intermingled with Christian love. They say we are anti-American. What foolishness! Countless times our movement has publicly declared itself friendly to the United States.”


91 El Paso Herald Post, 23 February 1942.
1943, the El Paso region consisted of seven local committees, including Ysleta, Fabens, Clint, and Fort Hancock. At the time there were 160 members in El Paso, making very credible the estimate of only 3,000 Sinarquistas in the United States. The 1943 membership reached a high point in the El Paso area of 187; within less than a year it had declined to 55 members.

Full-fledged members had to be Mexican citizens, and Spanish was the language of the meetings. The rank and file of most U.S. Sinarquista groups were immigrant agricultural workers whose educational background and organizational skills were minimal. The leaders in Texas, as elsewhere, tended to be “somewhat educated persons, professionals, or small scale businessmen. Jose Neder Quinones, a prominent organizer and leader of the El Paso Sinarquistas, worked as an administrator and bookkeeper with the Sacred Heart parish.”

The strong link with the Catholic Church, even though not official, meant that there were El Paso Sinarquista meetings held at church halls, and there were several favorable articles in the local Catholic newspapers, the Revista Catolica.

From 1943 on, the Sinarquistas in the United States declined rapidly, coming to a virtual end by 1945. Sinarquismo barely lingered in Mexico. The Mexican government banned the publication of the movement’s newspaper El Sinarquista in July 1944 and had already prohibited Sinarquista meetings. In March 1944, Ambassador Messersmith assured the Chief of Mexican Affairs at the State Department, “The movement [Sinarquismo] does not present any present danger to the Mexican Government or to the Mexican institutions…my own opinion is that we

\[92\] Ibid., 5 April, 1943.

\[93\] Oscar Lozano, “Patria y Nacionalismo en el México de Afuera,” 92.

\[94\] Ibid., 98

\[95\] Oscar Lozano, “Patria y Nacionalismo,” 86.
need not be very much concerned about the Sinarquists among the Latin American residents of Southwestern U.S.”

In Mexico, government intervention and the fractured leadership of Sinarquismo combined to demolish any real threat from the organization. By 1947, after only ten years of existence, its influence and power were gone.

Ciudad Juarez Mayors

The cordial relationship between Juarez and El Paso was not dependent on mayoral relations between the two cities, but naturally a positive rapport was beneficial. Throughout the war, El Paso had the same mayor, J. E. Anderson. There were three mayors of Juarez during World War II: Teofilo Borunda in 1940-1941, Antonio Bermúdez in 1942-43, and Arturo Chavez in 1944-46. Borunda was no longer mayor when Mexico became an ally in June 1942. Bermúdez had already charmed many influential Americans even before he became mayor. Chavez, by contrast, seemed to have little support on either side of the border. Mexican mayors can only serve one term, which it is also the case for governors and the president. Borunda and Bermúdez served for two years and Chavez was the first to have a three-year mayoral term after the change was made nationwide. When Borunda entered office, Consul General William Blocker predicted that Borunda “might probably inaugurate a relatively honest, efficient and constructive administration.” Soon afterwards he reported that “the new mayor aligned his forces for a clean-up of Ciudad Juarez of all classes of criminals.” Blocker concluded on a positive note: “The new municipal government was well organized, operating smoothly and

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96 Letter from Messersmith to Joseph F. McGurk, Chief, Division of Mexican Affairs, Department of State, 21 March 1944, RG 59, 812.00/32390, National Archives, College Park, MD.
preparing for more improvement of moral and social conditions."\(^{97}\) Borunda, who came from a powerful political family, went on to become a Diputado Federal (Congressman) and Senator.

But it remained for Antonio Bermúdez to forge a distinctive mayoralty. Even before he took office he had already been summoned to a meeting in the United States. William Blocker was thrilled. He wrote to a friend in Washington about Bermudez, describing him as my very good friend who was also close to President Avila Camacho. "Bermúdez is a gentleman of considerable means and is highly respected for his honesty, good judgment as a businessman, and for his friendship to the U.S."\(^{98}\) Before he had been in office two weeks, Bermúdez had already been at the U.S. Mayor’s conference in New York and spoken at the opening session. "Because he operates one of Mexico’s most famous distilleries, Mr. Bermudez was referred to as the ‘Johnny Walker’ of Mexico."\(^{99}\) The El Paso Times wrote that "he won tremendous applause with a speech that impressed hard-boiled politicians with its sincerity. As a mark of appreciation he was seated at the mayors’ banquet between Vice President Wallace and Secretary of the Navy Knox."\(^{100}\) Clearly, this was an unusual welcome for a Mexican mayor and presaged a remarkably successful administration. Blocker predicted "a golden era in this community during the next two years."\(^{101}\)

Bermúdez’s tenure during 1942 and 1943 became a time of extraordinary cross-border

\(^{97}\) "Promising Beginning of New Administration," Report to the Secretary of State January 1940, RG 59, 812.00/312.1121, National Archives, College Park, MD.

\(^{98}\) Letter to Laurence Duggan, Chief Division of the American Republics, Department of State, 27 December 1941, Office of Inter-American Affairs, RG 229, 812.00/31865, National Archives, College Park, MD.


\(^{100}\) El Paso Times, 4 April 1942.

\(^{101}\) Office of Inter-American Affairs, June 1942, RG 229, 812.00/31852, National Archives, College Park, MD.
relationships. The local news was full of his activities and noted that he was the only Juarez mayor to serve without pay; he was often featured in stories, and there was much talk of Pan-Americanism. His wife was a director of the women’s Pan-American Round Table and was “prominent in civic, charitable, and social activities in Juarez and El Paso.” The newspapers exploded with stories when Mexico entered the war in June of 1942. Mayor Bermúdez led a five thousand person parade in support of the Allies on May 25. The mayor was constantly active in supporting municipal improvements. He planned a high school, served as president of the local highway association to support the Pan-American Highway then being built, personally paid for the construction of two new grammar schools, the first named in honor of his mother. Government buildings, drainage systems, the Juarez stadium, the remodeled railway station, a public library, a gymnasium, a workers park, and several more schools were all part of his activities.

Bermúdez was well aware of Juarez’ “sin city” reputation and fought vigorously to make changes, none of which seemed to be long-lasting. During his administration he launched an anti-drug and anti-prostitution campaign which “apparently achieved significant success, but after his tenure, brothels, bars, cabarets, and other pleasure establishments flourished as never before.” Despite his efforts, the mayor was certainly aware of the limitations of his anti-vice campaign, particularly with the influx of soldiers coming across the border by the thousands. The year after Bermúdez was out of office, a Mexico City newspaper indignantly described the city: “Ciudad Juarez is not a city, it is…a center inhabited only by people of vice or lovers of money without regard to its source. In contrast to any orderly city with honest commerce, the

102 El Paso Herald Post, 13 April, 1942. As was customary at the time, she was always referred to as Mrs. Antonio J. Bermúdez; her first name was never mentioned.

103 Oscar Martinez, Border Boom Town, 103.
streets of Juarez remain without activity until two or three in the afternoon. The numerous centers of vice are closed, their personnel busy cleaning and preparing them for the soldiers’ arrival.”

Bermúdez continued a trajectory of success and good feelings. A few days before he left office the *El Paso Herald Post* headlined, “Bermudez Hailed Most Outstanding Mayor in Mexico.” Unlike most former Juarez mayors, Bermúdez continued to be in the public eye. He was lauded for his public health work, and he decried the living conditions of so many poor in Mexico. He proclaimed, “Social reform is absolutely necessary in Mexico so that the standards can be raised for the ill-clothed, ill-fed, and ill-housed.” Bermúdez was paid tribute by President Avila Camacho as the largest single contributor to education in the country. Subsequently, Bermúdez was elected Senator but did not serve since he was appointed head of Petroleo Mexicano (Pemex) in 1946. In 1959, he was designated as *embajador extraordinario en mission especial* and performed several missions in Europe and the Middle East.

The new mayor of Juarez had big shoes to fill. Arturo Chavez Amparo took office on January 1, 1944. His brother, Alfonso Chavez, was Governor of Chihuahua. The family came from Parral, Chihuahua, and Arturo Chavez only lived in Juarez for six months before becoming mayor. His administration was one of “systematic opposition to prostitution,” something that his predecessor too vowed to eliminate. The local newspaper *El Fronterizo* wrote

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104 Oscar Martinez, *Border Boom Town*, 104.


106 *El Paso Times*, 1 September 1944.


108 Ibid., 360.
hopefully, “Ciudad Juarez is not a city of vice and pleasure, not a city of brothels and over-indulgence. This city is composed in greater part of men and women whose life of work and decency and of serious and honorable activities is its greatest reward. The Government and the Mayor have firmly resolved to wipe out the scars which lower the prestige of Ciudad Juarez.”

The new mayor was described in an introductory speech by the American Consul Stephen Aguirre: “Mayor Chavez is from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Chihuahua. He is a rancher, a breeder of fine horses. His wife is related to the E. Wisbrun and Ed Sanders families of El Paso.” Local El Paso news coverage of Mayor Chavez was much diminished compared to his predecessor and generally described social occasions rather than political issues. Consul General William Blocker wrote derisively that Governor Alfredo Chavez “told me confidentially that his brother, Mayor Arturo Chavez, lacks administrative ability and that he was determined to see to it that his brother show more disposition toward governing the city or he would be asked to resign as Mayor of Juarez.”

Mayor Chavez remained in office in what was largely a lackluster administration. But throughout the war, there was heightened awareness and cross-border participation by both El Paso and Juarez mayors and their staffs.

**Shared National Holidays**

One of the unusual aspects of the wartime border was the enthusiasm for sharing national holidays. This was not entirely a new notion, but it was much more prevalent during the war.

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109 *El Fronterizo*, 8 July 1944.

110 *El Paso Times* 22 January 1944.

111 Summary of Conditions in Mexico, to the Secretary of State, July 1944, RG 59, 812.00/7-744. National Archives, College Park, MD.
years. These joint celebrations reflected the awareness on both sides of the border that they also symbolized the two countries’ involvement in the war. Local El Paso newspapers announced a plethora of bi-national celebrations. During the war, El Paso and Juarez jointly commemorated Pan American Day, American Army Day, Mexican Soldiers Day, Cinco de Mayo [May 5 recognition of the Mexican victory over the French in 1862], Fourth of July, 16 de septiembre [Mexican Independence Day], Labor Day, Columbus Day, and even Armistice Day. Throughout the year El Paso and Juarez were constantly sharing celebratory parades, banquets, and ceremonies. The two mayors, the Consular officers, the Fort Bliss and Juarez garrison commanding generals were regularly crossing the border to preside at the mutual festivities. Formal luncheons and dinners for hundreds of people were routinely mentioned in the local press. The Governor of Chihuahua often attended, although Texas governors W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel and Coke R. Stevenson never appeared.

Mayor Bermúdez was especially keen on hosting bi-national functions. Even before Mexico entered the war, Juarez mayor Antonio Bermúdez was described as “one of the outstanding men in Mexico in the promotion of good relations between the two countries. It was characteristic of his consistent friendship for this country that he decided to offer a concert by the Juarez Philharmonic Orchestra to the people of El Paso on Pan-American Day.”

A few weeks later Mexico declared war on the Axis. The July Fourth holiday was an enthusiastic celebration; there were rallies and parades, not only in El Paso but also in Juarez. The *Herald Post* described the festivities: “The United States and Mexico symbolized their comradeship in arms today when troops of both nations staged a stirring Fourth of July parade through El Paso streets. It was an unprecedented Independence Day spectacle and the second time in history

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112 *El Paso Times*, 14 April 1942.
that Ft. Bliss and Juarez troops have marched together in American soil.”¹¹³ In even more unusual fashion, a Fourth of July parade was also held in Chihuahua City.

These joint national celebrations continued throughout the war, at least on the border. The Mayor of Juarez declared September 7, 1942, a legal holiday in honor of the American Labor Day. Several days later, about a thousand El Pasoans and other Southwest residents traveled to Ciudad Chihuahua, an eight-hour train trip, to participate in their celebration of Mexican Independence Day. The September 16 holiday was also celebrated in the border towns of Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora “for the first time in the history of the adjacent towns.”¹¹⁴ To cap off the year, on November 11, Armistice Day [now Veterans Day], several hundred Juarez soldiers were part of that day’s parade.

Not surprisingly, the Pan American Day observances always garnered a great deal of attention. The April 1943 parade in Juarez included the usual dignitaries and also five hundred high school students from five different schools in El Paso. Although Pan American Day, which began in 1930, was not specifically related to the war, the cross-border activities were heightened during those years. Army Day, on April 6, garnered much attention in Juarez in 1945. “For probably the first time in the history of the United States, a foreign municipality, Juarez, will join this country in observing Army Day.”¹¹⁵ Between 1500 and 2000 soldiers from Fort Bliss, Biggs Field, and William Beaumont Hospital participated in a fiesta in the Juarez casino. That was only part of the Juarez extravaganza on that day. There was also a

¹¹³ El Paso Herald Post, 4 July 1942. The first time Mexican troops paraded with Fort Bliss soldiers was only two months previously to celebrate Cinco de Mayo.

¹¹⁴ Résumé of Condition, to the Secretary of State for September 1942 from Harold D. Finley, First Secretary of the American Embassy in Mexico City, 19 October 1942, RG 59, 812.00/32067, National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹¹⁵ El Paso Times, 6 April 1945.
luncheon for American military officers, a massing of the colors of the United Nations countries, and a special bullfight. On May 24, 1945, Fort Bliss reciprocated by belatedly honoring Mexican Soldiers Day, which was celebrated in Mexico as the Dia del Soldado on April 27.

Other border cites also celebrated their national holidays together: Cinco de Mayo, the Fourth of July, and 16 of September.\textsuperscript{116} In 1943, Mexican troops marched in the El Paso July 4 parade; in 1944, the newspaper \textit{El Fronterizo} even published a special Fourth of July edition. Every year, there were elaborate demonstrations of El Paso/Juarez solidarity for Mexican Independence Day on September 16. The \textit{El Paso Times} described how the city joined in the Mexican celebration: “The Times and the Police Department were swamped with telephone calls at 11 p.m. [at the time of the traditional \textit{grito}] from persons who wanted to know “why all the whistles are blowing and the boom-boom and bombing.”\textsuperscript{117} American participation was not just on the border. In the 1943 commemoration in Mexico City, the participants included General George C. Marshall, Attorney General Francis Biddle, Inter-American Affairs chief Nelson Rockefeller, and Governor Coke Stevenson. It was the first time in history a governor of Texas officially participated in Mexico’s observance of its proclamation of independence.\textsuperscript{118} Especially on the border, these friendly celebrations reflected joint support for the war.

These cross-border celebrations mostly did not survive the war. The close and warm relationships were perhaps never equaled again. For the El Paso July 4, 1945, celebration --- just eight weeks after the war ended in Europe and while the war was still raging against the Japanese -- there was not a single Mexican dignitary nor other people from Juarez mentioned in the \textit{El}

\textsuperscript{116} Résumé of Conditions to the Department of State for May 1942 from the U.S. Embassy, Mexico City, 17 June 1942, RG 59, 812.00/32067, National Archives, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{El Paso Times}, 16 September 1943.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 16 September 1943.
The Mexican army had a garrison in Juarez headed by General Jaime Quinones and then by General Sebastian Andrade Barriguete. They always appeared to be on the invitation lists for all the important social occasions in both cities. No doubt theirs was a public relations job as much as a military one. Counsel William Blocker came down on the side of the Mexican military, believing that they were eager to fight. Responding to a statement of President Avila Camacho that Mexican troops would not be sent abroad, Blocker thought that “this statement apparently does not represent the sentiments of the majority of military officers with whom I have talked nor the feeling of a large percentage of the Mexican people on our border. The commander [General Quinones] of the forces at Ciudad Juarez has on a number of occasions intimated to me that if the situation becomes critical he hoped to see Mexican troops pressed into service anywhere in the world against the common enemy.”

But except for one air squadron, the 70,000-man Mexican military did not fight in World War II. Once it was clear that the initial worry about Axis attacks was no longer in effect, the role of the Mexican military was more symbolic. Upon the occasion of General Quinones’ departure to another assignment, the *El Paso Herald Post* noted the non-combat role of the general: “American military and civilian leaders pay tribute to the Juarez military commander’s efforts in furthering good will and unity between the neighboring republics.” Toward the end of the war, a prominent American general, Lieutenant General George Grunert, paid tribute to Mexico’s part in World War II. He correctly emphasized the war materials that flowed north to

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119 *El Paso Times*, 4 July 1945.

120 Letter from Consul General William P. Blocker to the Secretary of State, 17 August 1942, RG 59, 812.00/32045, National Archives, College Park, MD.

the United States -- Mexico’s most significant contribution to the war effort. “You know of the strategic and vital materials which she has produced in great quantities, of the labor which has been made available for agriculture, industry, and railroads, of the manner in which she has built up a modern, well-equipped army prepared for defense of this hemisphere.”

**Mexico’s Reaction to the War**

U.S. State Department consuls in Mexico reported distinctly different reactions to Mexican participation in World War II, depending on whether they were located on the border or in the interior of the country. The State Department regularly received “Résumés of Conditions” from the twenty consular offices in Mexico. These were compiled by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City on a monthly basis. Résumés were typed in septuplicate, a reminder of how difficult it was to share written information before the advent of copy machines and then computers. Eight of the consulates, in Agua Prieta, Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, Mexicali, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras, and Tijuana, were on the U.S.-Mexico border. Generally speaking, their dispatches about Mexican attitudes toward the war were much more positive than reports from the interior. Even before the U.S. entered the war, William Blocker was reporting from Juarez the negative reactions to the Axis powers: “Some observers have expressed the belief that the death and destruction in Holland, Belgium, and Norway has had a tendency to increase favorable sympathy for the allies.”

The Ciudad Juarez report for January 1942 -- the month after the United States declared

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122 *El Paso Times*, 16 March 1945.

123 Report from Consul General William Blocker, May 1940, RG 59, 812.00, National Archives, College Park, MD.
war on Japan, Germany, and Italy -- could not have been more positive. “The Mexican people in northern Chihuahua and on both sides of the border in this vicinity feel more than ever that their destiny is closely linked with the U.S. Sentiment in this district for a total effort to defeat the Axis approaches the 100 percent mark.”

Ciudad Juarez ushered in their new mayor, Antonio Bermúdez, on January 1, 1942, and his support of the Good Neighbor policy and the United States entry into the war was steadfast. But 250 miles further south in the capital of Chihuahua, there was less support for the United States and more fear of the outcome. Chargé d'Affaires Raleigh Gibson reported, “Too many Mexicans here do not anticipate a conclusive victory of the United States in the present war, startled as they are by the striking power of the Japanese.”

By April, the news of the Bataan struggle in the Philippines was well known along the Mexican border. The Nogales consulate reported, “Several hundred American-born soldiers of Mexican race [sic] who participated in the fighting in the Philippine Islands were killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the Axis powers, and this tragedy appears to have brought home the fact that the blood of their own race has been spilled, causing the pro-Axis sentiment in this district to lose considerable ground.” The Piedras Negras consul echoed the “great feeling of pride because of the great number of U.S. soldiers of Mexican race said to have been in the Batan [sic] campaign.” Consulates in Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, and other border towns reported backing for the Allies, sometimes fervently. Perhaps the Matamoros counsel put it best: “As is natural in a border section where close business and social

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124 Résumé of Conditions during March 1942 from Chargé d’Affaires Raleigh Gibson to the Secretary of State, RG 59, 812.00/31893, National Archives, College Park, MD.

125 Ibid.

126 Résumé of Conditions in Mexico during April 1942 from Raleigh Gibson, Chargé d’Affaires to the Secretary of State, RG 59, 812.00/31985, National Archives, College Park, MD.
relationships necessarily exist, a warm personal feeling of friendship is widespread. It is realized with special clarity that the fate of Mexico and all its inhabitants is inextricably bound up with the fate of the United States in the present titanic struggle.”

However, away from the border, the U.S. consuls at first reported apathy. It was striking how often they used the same word to describe reactions to Mexico’s participation in the war. Acapulco, Durango, Guadalajara, Guaymas, La Paz, Monterrey, Tampico, and Torreon were all characterized as “apathetic” by the consuls in those cities. They employed other descriptions as well: complacent, disinterested, indifferent, unenthusiastic, unconcerned, and “varying from lukewarm to definitely cold.”

Some of this indifference on the part of the Mexican public could have stemmed from the fact that Mexico was not militarily involved. In addition, the two countries had a long history of somewhat less than amicable relations. Mexico’s contribution to the war was considerable but mainly in terms of war materials. There was general agreement that the sinking of the two Mexican merchant vessels in May of 1942 sent pro-German attitudes plunging. Mexico declared war on the Axis in June. Nonetheless, several consuls still reported pro-Axis sympathizers throughout the summer of 1942, but, as the Consul in La Paz wrote, “many of those persons who have been indifferent or mildly pro-Axis will lose their totalitarian sympathies.” And the Veracruz consulate reported: “The feeling is rather that Germany has acted the bully in attacking a weak country which is far from the theater of war and which was not harming Germany in any way.”

A year after America entered the war and seven months after Mexico joined the Allies, Consul General William Blocker in Juarez wrote

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127 Résumé of Conditions, April 1942.

128 Résumé of Conditions to the Secretary of State, U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, May 1942, 17 June, 1942; RG 59, 812.00 Chihuahua file 410, National Archives, College Park, MD.

with flourish about the continued support in the attitude of the Mexican residents in his district. “Today the public generally realizes that as co-belligerents they are contributing to the defeat of the Axis and will gladly lay down their lives to maintain their independence if called upon to do so.”

The relationship of Mexico with the Axis powers in the late 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s was a matter of serious concern to the United States. Within days after the United States declared war on the Axis, the United States was putting pressure on Mexico to seize German, Italian, and Japanese-owned firms. As in the United States, very few Germans or Italians were interned in Mexico. But many of their businesses and properties were seized. Even before the United States entered the war, the American consul in Juarez was considering the possibility of German activities in northern Chihuahua. In May 1940, William Blocker was already reporting on his investigation about any German activities in the area, including newspaper reports hinting at the possibility of Germans making landing fields on the border. Blocker concluded that the alarms over Germans were not a serious threat.

The concern about Japanese influence was more significant than that of Germany and Italy. Within a few days after the U.S. declaration of war, the *El Paso Herald Post* was headlining, “Business With Japs Complete Stoppage.” The El Paso papers scarcely

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130 Résumé of Conditions, December 1942, 4 January 1943.

131 Résumé of Conditions to the Secretary of State, May 1940, RG 59 812.00/701.6212, National Archives, College Park, MD.

mentioned the Germans, except for a local sensational spy case. Dr. Wolfgang Ebell, who had become a U.S. citizen only in 1939, had his citizenship revoked after allegations that he was a German spy. Ebell pled guilty to espionage and was sentenced to seven years in prison.\(^\text{133}\)

Although some Germans and Italians were arrested in Mexico, those numbers were small. As Stephen Niblo observed, “The fate of individual Axis citizens was in the hands of the minister of the interior [Miguel Aleman, who became President of Mexico in 1946]. U.S. diplomats concluded that businessmen frequently ‘bought their way out.’"\(^\text{134}\)

After Mexico declared war there were many consular reports commenting on Mexican policies concerning evacuation and relocation. These reactions to Axis citizens living in Mexico were undertaken with mixed results. The consul at Coatzacoalcos reported, “The removal of German, Italian, and Japanese nationals has not been thorough….Very few, if any, Germans and Japanese nationals have left.” The consulate at Mazatlan wrote that “several arrests have occurred of persons who have openly praised the Axis powers.” A Mexicali report was more direct: “Drastic measures against all persons of Axis sympathies are being taken by the local territorial Government which has stated that all persons of German, Italian, or Japanese origin must leave the peninsula by June 30, 1942.” Tampico announced that local authorities have been active in removing enemy aliens; Mexicali and Tijuana submitted similar reports. The Chihuahua consul described completely different treatment for Japanese as opposed to Germans and Italians. “People are quite willing to have the Japanese residents in this State placed in the concentration camp some fifteen miles from Chihuahua City, but there seems to be no demand

\(^{133}\) Ibid., 1 April, 1942.

\(^{134}\) Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 118.
for the interment of local Germans.”

While the border area of Mexico had few pro-German supporters, that was not true everywhere. In July 1942, the Vice Consul at Durango declared that probably 85 percent of the population in his district was pro-Nazi and “that practically nothing was being done by officials to curb subversive activities.” The concern about pro-Nazi attitudes subsided rather quickly, and pro-Allied support grew among the populace. It may be that the pro-Nazi feelings would more accurately have been characterized as anti-American attitudes.

Among the Axis residents in Mexico the Japanese in general were treated differently than the Germans or Italians. The Japanese population was very small; according to estimates in 1936, there were fewer than nine thousand in the entire country out of a total population of 21 million. Most Japanese in Mexico were ordered to relocate to Mexico City or Guadalajara, where they were nonetheless allowed to “continue their own economic activities.” Several prominent politicians intervened to help individual Japanese. Avila Camacho’s presidential secretary even took twenty-five Japanese families onto his estate. There were fears that the nearly four thousand living in Baja California might include “fifth columnists” and were supporting rumored Japanese plans to invade the territory. By mid-January 1942, the evacuation of Japanese from Baja California to central Mexico was completed.

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135 Résumé of Conditions to the Secretary of State, June 1942, 21 July 1942, RG 59 812.00, National Archives, College Park, MD. Note that the use of the term “concentration camp” mentioned in the Chihuahua report did not have the later and horrific meaning of the Nazi concentration camps.

136 Résumé of Conditions in Mexico during August 1942, RG 59, 812.00.32026, National Archives, College Park, MD.

137 Stephan Niblo, Mexico in the 1940s 119.

The local El Paso newspapers were alarmed at the fifth columnist accusations. They quoted sources claiming that of the five thousand Japanese living in Mexico City and the Mexican West Coast “all 5000 are suspected of being involved in a major Fifth Column movement against Mexico.” According to the same article, there were reports that five thousand Japanese in Mexico were headed for Baja California in accordance with a “pre-arranged plan.” Apparently, the article’s writer was not aware that these estimates of Japanese activities exceeded the entire Japanese population of Mexico, including women, children, and the elderly.

The reaction in Juarez was to place some Japanese in detention and to prohibit Americans from purchasing merchandise from Japanese stores in the city. A Juarez grocery changed its name from “La Japonesa” to “La Nacional,” but customs officials affirmed that goods from La Nacional would still be confiscated. On March 16, 1942, Mayor Bermúdez announced that registration of all resident aliens in Juarez would begin that day. By the end of the month thirty-one Juarez Japanese were sent “somewhere in the interior of Mexico where they will be given the chance to earn a living and be kept under close watch for the duration of the war.”

Consul William Blocker seemed to be especially focused on the Japanese in Juarez. From the end of 1941 and throughout 1942 his monthly reports usually carried some news about the Japanese there. The very day that the United States declared war on Japan he reported that the Japanese in the city were placed “under vigilant observation.” In March, fifteen Japanese were taken into custody following a “secret meeting.” Toward the end of the month Blocker reported that all Japanese nationals were being moved to Santa Rosalia [near Ciudad Chihuahua]

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“where it will be easy to keep them under strict surveillance.” But five days later he wrote, “Removal of the dangerous Japanese from Ciudad Juarez; 13 Japanese with their families have left for Mexico City where they will be interned in the interior, 8 more to follow.” In mid-April he commended General Quinines for his work in rounding up dangerous enemy aliens on the border. Raleigh Gibson, First Secretary at the American Embassy in Mexico City, added, “This evidence of spontaneous cooperation on the part of the Mexican authorities was greeted with satisfaction by the American officials across the Rio Grande charged with the surveillance of potential saboteurs and spies.” By September 1942 the Consul in Chihuahua reported with satisfaction: “The border Japanese aliens are still confined in an open camp, and some of them are working at the ranches of Government officials -- probably without pay. The small group of Japanese in this city seems to be inactive.”

The treatment of Japanese in Mexico was significantly different than that of the United States. Stephen Niblo explained, “As Chizukio Watanabe put it, ‘the government treatment of the Japanese was considerably milder and more benevolent than in other American countries.’” There was nothing resembling the 110,000 Japanese sent to isolated relocation camps in the United States.

140 Conditions prevailing in Cd. Juarez as result of the Declaration of War, 8 December 1941 #1076, 740.0011; Political and other conditions in Cd. Juarez, December 1, 1941-January 1, 1942, RG 59, 812.00/31968, National Archives, College Park, MD.

141 Raleigh Gibson, First Secretary, Résumé of Conditions in Mexico during March 1942, 13 April 1942, RG 59, 812.00/31962, National Archives, College Park, MD.

142 Résumé of Condition in Mexico during August 1942, 21 September 1942, RG 59, 812.00/32053, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Border Crossing -- He’s in the Army Now

While there were many wartime developments that had national implications for both the United States and Mexico, there were also distinctly local issues along the border. One such affect was the rapid expansion of Fort Bliss. The post grew from 3,000 soldiers in 1939 to 10,000 by the end of 1940; Consul William Blocker predicted that there would be 27,000 by mid 1941.\(^\text{144}\) By 1944, the post population reached close to 40,000 -- the third largest military base in the country during the war. The expanding population of Fort Bliss represented more than a third of El Paso’s entire population.

The Juarez population was growing also to an estimated 55,000. Part of that growth had to do with the expanding restaurants, night clubs, and other “sin city” attractions that lured so many soldiers across the border. Juarez was a trolley ride away from the soldiers’ barracks, introducing most of them to another country for the first time. But Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into World War II temporarily shut down their access to Juarez. The December 1941 ban was not lifted until February 26, 1942, through the impetus of Mayor Bermúdez and Brigadier General Quiñones. According to the *El Paso Herald Post*, “The news caused rejoicing among Juarez merchants.”\(^\text{145}\) By the end of 1942, Mayor Bermúdez declared that relations with the United States were better than ever before. “We welcome the tourists that come to Juarez. The soldiers from across the border behave splendidly. They are not a source of trouble at all. It speaks very highly for their morale and discipline.”\(^\text{146}\)

\(^{144}\) Résumé of Conditions in Mexico during February, 1942, 26 February 1942, RG 59 812.00, National Archives, College Park, MD.


\(^{146}\) Ibid., 7 December 1942.
But despite good intentions there were worries about thousands of young men going across the border. Even when Fort Bliss had only 10,000 troops, the U.S. army procured an agreement with the Juarez mayor and the commander of the garrison “to have American soldiers, arrested in Ciudad Juarez, taken directly to the military garrison instead of the filthy local jail.”\(^\text{147}\) The Juarez consulate reported that in April 1942 not a single American soldier was arrested in Juarez. The *Fort Bliss News* reported that “more than 1,000 men from Ft. Bliss crossed the Rio Grande into Juarez last Saturday night but there was not a single case of criminality or disorderliness.”\(^\text{148}\) Although there may have been no arrests it seems unlikely that there was no drunk or disorderly conduct, and certainly there was much evidence of that throughout the war. The Army established many rules in an attempt to curb problems. Soldiers needed a “good conduct pass to Juarez which would be issued only if they had conducted themselves with propriety on previous trips, or have not been charged with drunkenness and like offenses.”\(^\text{149}\) The Army had a special border patrol and for a while a platoon was stationed at the international bridges. The Border Patrol also erected a 125-foot lookout tower near the Santa Fe bridge in El Paso.\(^\text{150}\) Also at the bridge were the “pro” stations that purported to protect soldiers from venereal disease.

Mayor Antonio Bermúdez tried to curtail some of the soldiers’ activities by shutting down the Juarez red light district and by curtailing drunkenness. The *El Paso Herald Post* commented,

\(^\text{147}\) Résumé of Conditions, Consul General William P. Blocker, December 1940, RG 59, 812.00, National Archives, College Park, MD.

\(^\text{148}\) *Fort Bliss News*, 29 May 1942.


\(^\text{150}\) Interview with Coldwell Culberson by author, September 2002; *El Paso Herald Post*, 21 July 1943.
“Mayor Bermúdez emphasized that drinking in Juarez must be kept on a reasonable plane in line with the general morals cleanup drive in the city.”\textsuperscript{151} But ever-increasing crowds crossing the bridges made it more difficult. The \textit{Herald Post} headlined that 35,000 people crossed the bridge one night in May. “Warm weather and cold Mexican beer lured a large part of El Paso’s swollen military and civil [sic] population to the border city. Next weekend, which will follow a military pay day, is expected to set a new record for bridge crossings.”\textsuperscript{152} And in fact, the next week’s newspaper estimated over 40,000 border crossings--an amazing percentage of the total El Paso population.

On January 28, 1944, to cope with the increasing crowds, American Army military police were stationed in Juarez. But when Juarez officials reversed course and denied access for the M.P.s, Fort Bliss retaliated by limiting the number of military visitors to one percent of the post population, meaning 300 to 400 men rather than the usual thousands. On Saturday night, February 3, only 304 soldiers visited Juarez, as opposed to the typical 3,000 to 6,000 Army revelers. Two weeks after the original ban, the policy was changed, and Juarez officials hastened to welcome back the M.P.s.\textsuperscript{153} But border crossings returned to their usual pace for less than four months. On June 3, 1944, Juarez was closed abruptly to all military personnel. Although there was much speculation about the reason for the closure, the Army kept mum. They repeated several times in the exact same words that Juarez had been placed off limits “because the military authorities in this area considered that conditions existing in Juarez are

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 30 March 1943.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 26 April 1943, 3 May 1943.
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{El Paso Times}, 3 February 1944, 8 February 1944, 14 February 1944; \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 28 January 1944, 2 February 1944.
unfavorable to the welfare of the military personnel.” 154 The Governor of Chihuahua (and brother of the Mayor of Juarez) hastened to the border. He planned to appoint new Health and Traffic directors, as well as a new Police Chief. Consul Blocker reported to the State Department that “I believe that as soon as the steps now being taken to remedy conditions in Ciudad Juarez take effect that our soldiers should be permitted to visit Ciudad Juarez for recreational purposes.” 155 Nonetheless, it was another six weeks before American military were allowed to cross the border again.

Juarez was not a destination just because of its night life. The *Fort Bliss News* had a feature story on a Soldier’s Sunday in Juarez. It described the Guadalupe Mission, “The people who came to pray are mostly women in shawls, and it makes a wonderful picture to see them kneeled [sic] in supplication with their faces of beatitude lifted to the Madonna.” The article went on to described the bazaar, the skilled bootblacks, the xylophone player, and the lowered red flag at the Plaza de Toros which meant no bullfighting that day. 156 In early May of 1945 the *El Paso Times* published the previous twelve-month statistics for bridge crossings to and from Juarez. The record number of pedestrians totaled 11,666,371 in addition to 811,250 vehicle crossings. By far the greatest number of people was on foot. Just six days later the newspaper described V.E. Day [Victory in Europe Day]: “V.E. Day in El Paso was quiet, but V.E. Night in Juarez was lively.” 157

154 *El Paso Times*, 4 June 1944, 6 June 1944; *El Paso Herald Post*, 6 June 1944.

155 Letter from William Blocker to Secretary of States, 7 July 1944, RG 59. 812.00/7-744, Nationak Archives, College Park, MD.


Rationing and the “Benefit of Location”

Rationing during World War II was a daily reminder of wartime commitment to Allied victory. But rationing in the United States was far easier than for the Americans’ British and Russian allies. “John Kenneth Galbraith, first ‘price czar’ of the Office of Price Administration, has wryly noted, ‘Never in the history of human combat have so many talked about sacrifice with so little deprivation as in the United States in World War II.’”158 As the United States entered the war, soon there were shortages of steel, nylon, tin, wood, cotton, and soap. Rationed items began with tires and gasoline. Food products included sugar, coffee, butter and other fats, canned foods, and red meats. For El Pasoans, almost all of these items could be procured just across the border and often at lower prices than in the United States. Throughout the war, El Pasoans enjoyed the “benefit of location.” The result of wartime rationing was one occasion in the play of power and money between the U.S. and Mexico on which Mexico had the upper hand along the border.

The first consumer items to be rationed were automobile tires, and that process began less than three weeks after Pearl Harbor. The Office of Price Administration (OPA) was originally formed in the spring of 1941, but its sweeping powers only became official on January 30, 1942, when President Roosevelt signed the Emergency Price Control Act. The bill gave the OPA authorization to institute rationing and price ceilings and take steps to keep prices down and prevent inflation and war profiteers.159 Initially, tire rationing did not affect El Pasoans who


could easily buy tires in Mexico. But on March 2, 1942, U.S. Customs banned the importation of new tires. “Used tires were not covered by the ban, and consequently the business of Juarez tire dealers and recappers continued to boom.”\textsuperscript{160} Recapped tires sold for twelve to fifteen dollars each to El Paso motorists, equivalent to a current cost of $150 for each tire. In August 1942, the United States banned the importation of all tires—new or recaps. But like many other OPA rules, this was extremely difficult to enforce. By 1944, black market Mexican tires were selling for $90 [$1,000 per tire at present-day rates].\textsuperscript{161}

In May 1942, sugar was the next consumer product to be rationed. But this rationing had virtually no effect on El Paso consumers. They simply had to cross the border. U.S. Customs allowed shoppers to return with two kilos, or four and one-half pounds of duty-free Mexican sugar per person per trip. They could make several trips per day if they wished. El Paso businesses also bought their sugar in Mexico. Although they had to pay a duty of two and one-half cents per pound, it was still cheaper than buying sugar in the United States.\textsuperscript{162}

Gasoline was rationed not because there was insufficient supply but because of losing access to the rubber plantations of Southeastern Asia which were under Japanese control. The aim of gasoline rationing was to sharply curtail mileage so that tires would last longer. Gasoline rationing began on December 1, 1942. Although it was necessary to conserve rubber, it was deliberately deferred by Roosevelt until after the national elections of November 1942. The A sticker entitled most motorists to only four gallons a week (which was later reduced to three). B stickers were for defense workers with no public transportation; C stickers were for doctors

\textsuperscript{160} Richard Dugan, “Benefit of Location,” 39.

\textsuperscript{161} Summary of political conditions, Consulate at Ciudad Juarez, April 15, 1944, RG 59, 812.00/32386, National Archives, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{162} Richard Dugan, “Benefit of Location,” 42, 45.
and others whose driving was deemed essential. As Richard Dugan remarked, “Perhaps this violation of the doctrine of equality of sacrifice was one of the reasons gasoline rationing was so vastly unpopular.”\textsuperscript{163} Juarez officials immediately sought to protect their supply of gasoline, but without great effect. “The only motorists with foreign license plates who can buy gasoline in Juarez are regular customers who have been buying gas in the Mexico city,” reported the \textit{El Paso Herald Post}.\textsuperscript{164} Obviously, the “regular customers” designation was not enforceable, and Juarez continued to be a source for gasoline through the war. Four months later, the Juarez consulate reported that “streams of cars continue to cross the international bridges for the purchase of gasoline, thereby practically avoiding the effect of gasoline rationing in El Paso.”\textsuperscript{165} Although the OPA tried in diverse ways to discourage this “benefit of location,” their various proposals were not effective. The OPA was constantly changing national rationing rules, and they were often confounded by the additional complexity of border issues. The very essence of the idea of rationing was to make scarce goods equally available to the whole population. The Office of Price Administration struggled mightily to figure out ways to bring the border into compliance with the spirit of shared sacrifice, but they were not often successful.

Food rationing became widespread in 1943. Many foods were rationed because, despite America’s ability to produce vast quantities of food, the country was exporting about one-third of its supply overseas to the military and to civilian populations of our allies. Coffee, meat, butter and other fats, cheese, and canned goods were all rationed. Interestingly, canned foods were

\textsuperscript{163} Richard Dugan, “Benefit of Location,” 20.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 15 December 1942.

\textsuperscript{165} Summary of political reports for February, March 24, 1944, RG 59, 812.00/32126, National Archives, College Park, MD.
only rationed because of the tin shortage, not because of food shortages. El Pasoans took this all in stride; after all, they had an alternative source. “A constant stream of shoppers from the United States returned with their daily, duty-free two kilos of meat, more than they were allotted in a week by the OPA.”

Rationing for Mexicans

American citizens along the border were not the only recipients of ration coupons. Almost immediately after food rationing began a new problem presented itself. Thousands of Mexicans citizens worked and lived in middle class and upper class homes in El Paso. They ate and slept in their employers’ houses and yet they were not eligible for ration coupons. Clearly something had to be done. Very quickly, the OPA legal department in Washington ruled that Mexican servants were eligible for ration books. This was the first of many issues concerning Mexican citizens that the OPA struggled with. It was not just a local situation, for the treatment of Mexican citizens had to take into consideration that “as an important trading partner and an ally in the Second World War, the goodwill of the people and government of Mexico was an important U.S. foreign policy consideration.”

In April 1943 the OPA announced a rationing system for Mexicans who lived within 20 kilometers of the border. They were eligible for meats, processed foods, and fats and oils with the same allotment as U.S. citizens. In early May, Juarez residents began registered for

168 Richard Dugan, “Benefit of Location,” 73.
rationing certificates. It was remarkable that rationing was extended across the border, even more remarkable since most food rationed in the United States was readily available in Mexico. The OPA declared that the purpose behind the expansion of rationed goods on the border was “in order to further the Good Neighbor Policy, and “to maintain normal trade relationships between the people living on both side of the Mexican border.”

But the Mexican Border Program had trouble from the start. Perhaps it was ill-conceived; certainly many local leaders thought so. The *El Paso Times* reported that “Officials of the El Paso County Rationing Board joined the Mexican Chamber of Commerce early this year doubting the wisdom of the plan.”

Apparently, the program engendered thriving black market transactions in meat, butter, and shoe coupons. Residents from across the border, finding shoes plentiful in Juarez, “have been reported selling shoe coupons to El Pasoans at prices of from 25 cents to $2.50 with an average of $1. It was also reported that meat and butter points are being sold for as much as 10 cents a point.” Juarez residents who received ration points could theoretically sell all their points on the black market for a comfortable profit. By the end of 1943 nearly half the population of Juarez -- about 25,000 people -- were registered with the El Paso ration board. Perhaps this was more “Good Neighborliness” than was originally intended. As was the case for so much of the national rationing system, the Mexican Border Program was consistently being tinkered with.

In February 1944, for the first time, the officials of the Office of Price Administration met in El Paso to discuss border rationing problems. The attendees were government employees from Texas, Washington, DC, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. They produced a

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169 Richard Dugan, “Benefit of Location,” 84.

170 *El Paso Times*, 3 December 1943

171 *El Paso Times*, 3 December 1943.
surprisingly blunt document. “The administration of the Border Rationing Program, since its inception, has been haphazard at the National Office level. The highly dictatorial manner in which the program was conceived and administered left little choice for the Field but to do the best they could with a bad job.” Despite the “disrepute into which this plan has fallen, no one who appeared before the Conference, American or Mexican, denies that some sort of a Mexican Border Rationing Plan is necessary.” 172 In the end, residents on both sides of the border benefited from the unintentional consequences of the Benefit of Location.

Conclusion

Mexico had proven to be the most valuable wartime ally in Latin America. During the war, the United States did not have to be concerned about an insecure border. And the vast mineral wealth of Mexico poured into the war coffers of the United States. The initial concerns about needed manpower, especially in agriculture and on the railroads, were assuaged by both braceros and illegal aliens. The border did react to wartime changes in ways that were often distinctly varied from the national picture. The warm relationship and supportive attitudes between Mexicans and Americans was typical along the border but not elsewhere in Mexico. Border relations were particularly significant in lessening the balance of power that historically had prevailed. Nonetheless, U.S. power continued to shape the border and influence Mexico in general.

Once the war was over, United States-Mexico relations shifted. There may have been far fewer social exchanges, but certainly U.S. capital flowed into Mexico, financing Mexico’s

172 Mexican Border Rationing Conference, “Border Rationing Program,” 14 February 1944, Office of Price Administration (OPA), Record Group 188, National Archives Southwest Region, Fort Worth, TX.
industrialization. Postwar Juarez continued to welcome thousands of tourists and military men; both braceros and illegal immigrants flooded into Texas to work on farms and ranches. According to historian Oscar Martinez, Mexico City “could no longer afford to ignore the traditionally remote zone. Good economics mandated that the region be incorporated into the national network.”

Population growth was significant in many border areas; from 1940 to 1950 El Paso’s population increased from 96,816 to 130,486. During the same period, Ciudad Juarez grew from 48,881 to 122,550. The Oscar Martinez model of border relations characterizes the U.S.-Mexico border of the time as interdependent with friendly and cooperative relations. But perhaps those relations never again achieved the closeness that was engendered by World War II.

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173 Oscar Martinez, Border Boom Town, 115.
Chapter 2

Labor and the Economy on the Wartime Border

“We called for workers and there came human beings.”

World War II brought some significant changes in labor relations and economic structure to El Paso and the border area. Several local developments mirrored national trends, while others differed from the national norm. War-related changes were especially noticeable for labor in El Paso, particularly for farm laborers, Mexican American union workers, and some “pink collar” employees, i.e., women clerical workers. Unlike other parts of the United States, however, it appears that women, either Mexican American or Anglo, did not have the opening of opportunity that they obtained in areas where defense industries were primary. And perhaps the women had fewer opportunities because of the labor structure of the border.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, El Paso was built upon cheap labor from Mexico. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of Mexicans looking for better wages in el otro lado (“the other side,” i.e., the United States). Proud boosters of El Paso called the keys to the El Paso economy the Four Cs: Cotton, Copper, Cattle and Climate. Mexican farm workers labored to produce cotton and raise cattle at extremely low wages. But these wages were still much higher than what farm laborers were paid in Mexico. The large copper smelting plants of


175 See Chapter Four for details about wartime work opportunities for El Paso women.
the American Smelting and Refining Company (AS & R, later ASARCO) and Phelps Dodge were mostly staffed by Mexican workers who were regularly denied opportunities for promotion and were paid “Mexican wages.” In the United States of the time, people of Mexican heritage -- whether U.S. citizens, resident aliens, or Mexican nationals -- were all called “Mexican.” “Mexican” was often pejorative, replaced by “Spanish” or “Latin” to indicate a more positive view of Mexican background. The so-called Mexican wages were common throughout the Southwest. Humberto Silex, a labor leader of the time, remembered unskilled workers at AS & R in the early 1930s being paid as little as 10 cents an hour.\(^{176}\) The Depression cut keenly into the already low wages of unskilled industrial workers, farm laborers, and domestics, virtually all of whom were Mexicans. The early 1930s also saw the Repatriacion -- the forced repatriation or sometimes voluntary departure -- of perhaps half a million Mexican to Mexico in order to open up more jobs for U.S. citizens and avoid welfare costs. In the 1930s, Juarez suffered one economic blow after another: the Depression, the Repatriado, the loss of tourist dollars, and then the national Mexican campaign that shut down “vice” locales. Thousands of jobs disappeared.

The war brought massive changes in labor structure and opportunities, mainly because of Fort Bliss. The Army base became one of the largest military installations in the country, with 30,000 soldiers by mid-1941, even before America entered the war. Biggs Field and William Beaumont Hospital brought many thousands more. By early 1943, there were already two thousand civilians holding Fort Bliss jobs.\(^{177}\) Defense industries were not a major portion of El Paso’s economy, but many industries expanded, including AS & R, Phelps Dodge, El Paso Brick

\(^{176}\) Humberto Silex interview by Oscar Martinez and Art Sadin, 28 April 1978, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

\(^{177}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 25 February 1943.
Company, and Portland Cement. More skilled jobs were created, almost always going to Anglo men.\footnote{Gerald Nash, \textit{The American West Transformed: the Impact of the Second World War} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 41.} Jobs in construction and the service industries expanded considerably--banks, stores, medical care, and restaurants. According to Gerald Nash, “By the middle of 1942, the available local labor supply in most areas in the West was being exhausted.”\footnote{Gerald Nash, \textit{The American West Transformed: the Impact of the Second World War} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 41.} This was not true in El Paso, at least for unskilled and semiskilled labor. The War Manpower Commission consistently classified the labor market in El Paso as “adequate labor supply.” In 1944, this became “slight labor surplus,” and from November 1944 to May 1945, “moderate labor surplus.”\footnote{\textit{Labor Market}, War Manpower Commission Report and Analysis Service, WMC publications 1942-1945. RG 211, Entry No. 164, Box 3, National Archives, College Park, MD; \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 3 February 1944.} Unlike so many wartime American cities, El Paso consistently maintained enough workers for local needs.

The bracero program had an impact on the border, even though the Mexican government refused permission for braceros to work in Texas because of rank discrimination against Mexicans. Ironically, Juarez/El Paso was the railroad junction for tens of thousands of braceros traveling north during the war. But there were many more aspirantes for the farm and railroad jobs than the bracero program could accommodate. Many men streamed north hoping for a chance to cross the border. Some were stopped at the border but many others filtered their way across, the beginning the process of unauthorized immigration that the U.S. and Mexico still struggle with.

\footnote{\textit{Labor Market}, War Manpower Commission Report and Analysis Service, WMC publications 1942-1945. RG 211, Entry No. 164, Box 3, National Archives, College Park, MD; \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 3 February 1944.}

The most successful union organizing along the border was the CIO-affiliated Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Mine-Mill organizers also reached across the border. During the war, there were joint international labor day parades; Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano made a special visit to the border for July 4 celebrations, and Mine Mill signed a Pact of Friendship with the Mexican mine union. Mine-Mill officials also worked with the FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Committee) and helped organize a planned hearing in El Paso in 1942. Years of organizing effort finally culminated in contracts with both AS & R and Phelps Dodge. But this effort did not seem to affect the immediate job prospects of other workers, especially Mexican Americans.\textsuperscript{181}

This chapter probes the degree of continuity and change in the border labor and economic situation. Did El Paso/Juarez still have an economy based largely on cheap labor? In the postwar world, military bases added a permanent change in the border region. Arreola and Curtis point out that ten major bases continued to thrive during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{182} Postwar strikes led by the CIO in many parts of the country were part of new labor demands. El Paso, too, participated and union workers gained. The railroad bracero program ended in 1947, but the farm bracero program was renewed and greatly expanded after the war and lasted until 1964. Texas was admitted to the program in 1947. But along with the legal entry of braceros came tens of thousands of undocumented workers. The Southwest’s desire for and habits of cheap labor continued.


Braceros

On September 27, 1942, a train crossed the border between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso headed for Stockton, California. On the side of the railroad cars someone had written, “De las democracias sera la victoria.” (Victory will come from the democracies.) On board the train were 1,500 Mexican workers, the first arrivals of braceros in the United States, the vanguard of 4.5 million bracero entrants who would work as contract laborers in the United States from 1942 to 1964. The Bracero Program, as it came to be known, was not a single program but rather a series of agreements and laws that permitted American agriculturalist growers to contract with Mexican workers. The term “bracero” means one who works with his arms -- akin to the English “hired hand.”

The Bracero Program had its antecedents in seasonal labor migrations since before the turn of the twentieth century. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and later the 1907 Gentleman’s Agreement to restrict Japanese entrance into the United States opened the door for recruiting nearby Mexican labor. Until 1917, the 2,000-mile border with Mexico was almost completely porous, with few restrictions on back and forth movements. The first attempt to organize Mexican contract labor also came in wartime -- the 1917 to 1921 program established by the Department of Labor. Between 1900 and 1930 the average number of Mexican immigrants

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was between 60,000 and 100,000 annually.\textsuperscript{186} As Craig Allan Kaplowitz points out, most of these were seasonal agricultural workers, and it has been estimated that about two-thirds of them returned to Mexico every year. But this established a dependency on temporary farm labor from Mexico -- labor that growers could access at a very low cost. For the last one hundred years, except for the Depression years of the 1930s, agribusiness has depended on bargain-basement wages to workers from across the border.

The Bracero Program began as an agreement between the governments of Mexico and the United States in July, 1942. Later Congress passed Public Law 45 and Public Law 78 that undergirded executive authority. Negotiations between the two countries had begun soon after Pearl Harbor. Although usually described as a measure taken because of wartime labor shortages, eighteen months before America’s entry into the war growers in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas were pressing for Mexican laborers.\textsuperscript{187} Except for the railroad bracero program (1943-1947) all the contract employment was in agriculture. Aspiring braceros were recruited in Mexico by the Mexican government. Once at the border, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) processed the workers. The Department of Labor was responsible for overseeing the contracts with agricultural employers. The major players in the U.S. were the State Department, the INS (part of the Department of Justice), the Department of Labor, and, to a lesser extent, the Department of Agriculture. And the bracero, Ernesto Galarza has described, was important, yet insignificant, central yet marginal in the midst of all.\textsuperscript{188}

The greatest beneficiaries of the program were the growers. Ellis Hawley, in his 1966


\textsuperscript{187} Arthur F. Corwin, Immigrants -- and Immigrants, 150.

\textsuperscript{188} Ernesto Galarza, Merchants of Labor, 45.
monograph, described the “politics of agriculture” -- how a small group of farm employers were able to take advantage of the bracero program and shape it to their desires. Less than two percent of the nation’s farmers actually employed braceros.\(^\text{189}\)

Agricultural pressure groups could make use of an enormous potent symbol: the family farm, the bulwark of the nation, even though family farms were no longer a significant part of agriculture in America. Agribusiness had not only a potent family farm myth to further their interests but also a farm-oriented political structure that reached from local rural officials to Washington, D.C.\(^\text{190}\) In addition, the Texas state legislatures and many others tended to over-represent rural areas, and agribusiness held sway on Capitol Hill in an era when seniority ruled and committee chairs often came from one-party rural districts.

Agribusiness vigorously (and usually successfully) opposed improvements in work or living conditions. The Associated Farmers of California wrote to Nelson Rockefeller, then head of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, after a strike by Mexican workers in late 1941. The association carefully explained that farmers were not responsible for the strike, since “there was no discrimination against the Mexican workers.” In a classical blame-the-victim mode they wrote that “the Mexicans began to abuse all white people” The association had an explanation: “One must have a thorough and personal familiarity with Mexican psychology. It must be recognized that the average Mexican is almost childlike when it comes to managing his own affairs. He leans on his employer, or on someone else, and has not yet learned to see himself through the periods of stress that occur in every kind of society


\(^{190}\) Ibid., 163.
and in every walk of life.”

Blaming the victim was not necessarily an unusual reaction. In El Paso, which was a major railroad station for braceros during the war, the *El Paso Herald Post* warned about possible diseases threats from the workers. Its headline declared: Filth from Work Trains Threaten El Paso’s Health. “Health authorities today warned that deadly disease epidemics might break out as a result of neglect to provide sanitary safeguards on trains bearing migrant Mexican workers, which are parked nearby every night on sidings in El Paso. The City-County Health Unit said that the recent death of a four-year-old El Paso boy of typhoid fever probably was due to infection from one of these trains.”

Even the State Department weighed in as part of a February 1943 report: Their report denied farm workers’ allegations of mistreatment and discrimination brought back to Mexico by what the State Department called “misfits.”

The Mexican government’s negotiating position was strongest during the early war years, when there was a widespread perceived need for additional manpower and a sense of contribution to the war effort. Ironically, the wartime bracero program employed far fewer men than in later years. In 1942, the first year of the program, they were only 4,200 braceros admitted. But the following year that number had jumped to 52,098; in 1944 to 62,170, and in 1945 to 120,000. Mexico did receive substantial benefits from the Bracero Program. As low as farm wages were in the U.S., they were still perhaps “five to ten times higher than in

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191 Letter to Nelson Rockefeller from Associated Farmers of California, December 22, 1941. RGB 229. 1717, National Archives, College Park, MD.


193 Résumé of Conditions, January 1943, 27 February 1943, Department of State. 812.00/32126. National Archives.

194 Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 239.
Money that the braceros sent back home was one of the largest sources of dollars for Mexico. Additionally, it acted as a “disaster relief program” for the Mexican government. Areas that suffered severe economic or weather disasters were targeted for bracero recruitment. It could be regarded as a kind of safety valve that alleviated political unrest and protest among Mexico’s rural poor.

One of the major goals of both governments was to control and stabilize the northward flow of Mexican labor. But contrary to intent, the Bracero Program significantly increased the number of undocumented workers. Since Mexico did not permit braceros to work in Texas during the war, the state scrambled to find enough farm labor to till the soil and pick crops in 1942. The war economy was already going full blast, and it was difficult for Texas agriculture to find enough local workers willing to accept the low wages. That year Texas tried to recruit school children, high school and college students, and housewives. In El Paso, hundreds of school children worked in the fields picking cotton. Although “leading El Paso businessmen” and Fort Bliss officers’ wives volunteered to help, not surprisingly they did not become cotton pickers. But it wasn’t long before Texas tapped into the undocumented labor market that was eager to cross the border for employment.

All across the country there were several reason for the Bracero Program’s unintended

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195 Résumé of Conditions, May and June 1943, 28 June 1943. RG 59, 812.00/32171, National Archives, College Park, MD. Other sources have estimated that the wage increase was three to five times that existing in Mexico. Different regions of the country had different prevailing wages.


197 James F. Creagan, “Public Law 78,” 60; Manuel Garcia y Griego, “The Importance of Contract Laborers,” 70.


199 El Paso Herald Post, 20 July 1942; El Paso Times, 5 October, 16 October, 19 October 1942.
consequences. First, the recruiting centers in Mexico attracted far more laborers than could be
hired in the program. Estimates state that only one in ten aspirantes actually received a
contract. They aspired to be guest workers but were not on the guest list. An alternative for the
remaining 90 percent was to enter the United States illegally. Bribery also turned some bracero
applicants into undocumented workers. Most men applying for the farm jobs paid a bribe at the
municipio and again at the recruiting center in Mexico. Thus, many opted for the cheaper, if
more hazardous, illegal entry. Further, once a Mexican laborer -- documented or
undocumented -- had the experience of working in the United States, it was easier to cross the
border again and find work. Most of all, the greatest “pull” factor was the growers who wanted
and came to expect low-paid Mexican labor; in fact, the growers behaved as if they had “an
inherent right to it.”

Traqueros

A little known aspect of the Bracero Program was the employment of traqueros (railroad
workers) who repaired the tracks of thirty-six different American railroad companies from 1943
to 1947. By 1945, a total of 121,350 traqueros had worked on U.S. railroads. This
compared with 238,500 farm braceros during the same time, yet nearly every reference to

200 Juan Ramon Garcia, Operation Wetback, the Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954

201 Alexander Monto, The Roots of Mexican Labor Migration (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 57; Juan Ramon

202 War Manpower Commission, Mexican Track Labor Program 1945, RG 211, Files IB-4H and 2D-4D, National
Archives, College Park, MD., Barbara Driscoll, The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II” (PhD. diss., Notre
Dame University, 1980), 167.
braceros is completely concentrated on the farm workers in the program. Only Barbara Driscoll has written a book about the railroad program, and there are scarcely any mentions of the traqueros elsewhere.\textsuperscript{203} The railroad bracero program got underway seven months after the farm initiative had started. Unlike the farm program, which existed in twenty-three states in the West and Midwest, the railroad program was nationwide. And although the Mexican government was adamant about not permitting farm workers into Texas, the Southern Pacific Railroad was authorized to assign railroad braceros to its tracks in Texas. The Texas and Pacific Railroad in Midland, Texas, also employed the track workers.\textsuperscript{204} Almost 60 percent of all the Mexican trains that delivered the workers to U.S. railroad employers crossed the border at El Paso. The city was the hub that supplied Midwestern and Southwestern railroads. Other ports of entry were Nogales, Arizona, and Laredo, Texas.\textsuperscript{205}

All the braceros, both agricultural and railroad, were supposed to ride in first class cars of the Ferrocarriles Nacionales. But clearly this was not always the case. Even early on, there were many reports of braceros traveling in boxcars, despite the fact that first class cars had been reserved and paid for by American railroad companies.\textsuperscript{206} Once railroad braceros were sent to their work sites they were usually in isolated areas in small groups of eight to ten men. While some were housed in permanent buildings, many ended up living in abandoned automobiles, boxcars, or shacks.\textsuperscript{207} One benefit was the higher wages that railroad braceros received. By

\textsuperscript{203} Barbara Driscoll, \textit{The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II} (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies Books, University of Texas, 1999), 141.

\textsuperscript{204} Barbara Driscoll, \textit{The Tracks North}, 171.

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{206} Barbara Driscoll, “The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II,” 103, 104.

\textsuperscript{207} Ernesto Gamboa, U.S. Latinos and Latinas Conference, “Workers on the Home Front,” Austin: University of
the beginning of 1944, the traqueros were earning 46 cents an hour compared with the 30 cents the farm braceros received. Sometimes these farm workers could earn more if their wages were calculated on a piece-rate basis.\textsuperscript{208} El Paso newspapers noted the passage of traqueros through the city; trainloads crossed the border several times a week.\textsuperscript{209} The United States and Mexico held a conference in El Paso in January 1944 to discuss streamlining importation of Mexican workers. The meeting was to affirm plans to import 20,000 traqueros and 75,000 agricultural braceros during the year.\textsuperscript{210} It seemed odd to hold the discussions in El Paso since none of the planned 75,000 agricultural workers would serve in Texas.

The largest recipient of railroad braceros was the Southern Pacific Railroad Company and its subsidiaries. By December 1944, 72 percent of the Southern Pacific track workers were braceros. “Complaints about the Southern Pacific treatment of its braceros abounded, harkening to its previous history of employment of Mexican immigrants.”\textsuperscript{211} Railroad braceros complained of substandard living conditions, tainted food, and unfair deductions from their pay. Although Southern Pacific was not the only railroad company to receive complaints, they seemed to be often careless or uncaring about the living arrangements and excessive payroll deductions of their bracero employees. Nonetheless, the company’s seventieth anniversary history of Southern Pacific lauded the traqueros, whose “work was highly satisfactory, and from

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{208} Barbara Driscoll, \textit{The Tracks North}, 103.


\textsuperscript{210} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 9 January 1944.

\textsuperscript{211} Barbara Driscoll, \textit{The Tracks North}, 141.
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the start the railroad made he visiting workers feel as much at home as possible.”

Prisoners of War

The El Paso area was host to thousands of Italian and German prisoners of war from 1943 to 1946. All told, some 425,000 POWs were sent to the United States for interment. In nearby New Mexico, there were major prison camps at Roswell, Lordsburg, and a sub camp at Las Cruces. Both Roswell and Lordsburg were chosen at least in part because of their geographic isolation. Roswell had space for 4,800 detainees; Lordsburg eventually had 5,500 prisoners, more than the population of these two towns and among the largest POW camps in the United States. The first POWs arrived in the area in the latter part of 1943. They were part of Rommel’s Afrika Korps and included both Germans and Italians. Later prisoners were from the battles in Sicily and the Normandy invasion. Originally the prisoners were kept in camp, but later they were allowed to work as contract laborers primarily in agriculture. Until September 1943, neither Las Cruces, New Mexico, nor El Paso growers could access POW labor because War Department regulations prohibiting the establishment of permanent POW camps within one hundred miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Presumably, the worry was that escaped prisoners would try to cross the border into Mexico. In fact, that did happen, but in small numbers and the escapees were usually taken back into custody.


214 El Paso Herald Post, 1 August 1943.
In the fall of 1943 Texas farmers were especially anxious to avail themselves of POW labor because they did not have access to the bracero program. Somewhat ingenuously, the *El Paso Herald Post* described the problem this way: “Efforts to obtain Mexican labor for the forthcoming cotton picking have been bogged down for weeks due to charges by the Mexican government that Mexican nationals are discriminated against in certain Texas communities and [due] to international red tape.”\(^{215}\) El Paso County and Las Cruces growers were anxious to overturn the government decision to deny POW employment within one hundred miles of the international border. N.B. Phillips, of the Elephant Butte, New Mexico, Irrigation District, said an acute labor shortage prevailed in the cotton production area from Elephant Butte south to El Paso. He railed, “Our farmers are about fed up with the New Deal and all the social stuff that goes with it. They have reached the limit of their patience.”\(^{216}\)

The growers were successful in eliciting congressional support. Both U.S. Senator Carl Hatch of New Mexico and Congressman R.E. Thomason from El Paso weighed in: Ignoring the possibility of cross-border escapes, Congressman Thomason said, “There is no reason, as far as I can see, why the Italian war prisoners cannot be returned to work on the farms.”\(^{217}\) The politicians’ arguments and the adamant growers were successful in waiving the hundred-mile rule. On September 7, 1943, the *El Paso Times* announced the first contingent of POWs to be employed in El Paso County cotton fields. They were to be sent from the Lordsburg, New Mexico concentration camp [sic].\(^{218}\) The prison laborers were housed in the El Paso Coliseum.

\(^{215}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 1 August 1943.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 23 August 1943.

\(^{217}\) *El Paso Times*, 27 August 1943.

\(^{218}\) *El Paso Times*, 7 September 1943. The term “concentration camp” had not yet acquired the horrific meaning.
The Italian prisoners were immediately welcomed, and El Pasoans took it upon themselves to contribute playing cards, magazines, games, musical instruments, radios, and sports equipment.\textsuperscript{219} The \textit{Fort Bliss News} described the arrival of the Italian workers. “Happy and singing, the first contingent arrived Saturday to prepare quarters at the Coliseum. One hundred wooden dining tables [for the one thousand prison workers] were set up; showers were installed as well as a modern heating plant.”\textsuperscript{220} The prisoners volunteered to pick cotton. Mechanized cotton pickers had not yet been perfected, so cotton had to be picked by hand. The men dragged heavy canvas bags, and as they filled the bags with cotton, the sacks grew heavier. As they pulled the cotton from the bolls, the pointed bolls scratched and punctured their hands. The POWs were not particularly good at the job. The \textit{El Paso Times} wrote that “general performance of the prisoner pickers is ‘approximately satisfactory,’ farmers reported, and about on a par with other types of inexperienced pickers.”\textsuperscript{221}

The relationship with Italian prisoners improved further after the October 13, 1943, Italian declaration of war against Nazi Germany. Italy was then recognized as a “co-belligerent.” The Italians POWs in the United States were allowed to swear allegiance to the Allies and were given the option of joining Italian Service Units. Those that joined were allowed to wear American uniforms and enjoy special liberties and privileges, including off-camp excursions. In December 1944, the \textit{El Paso Times} headlined, “Union Leader Asks Reason for Liberty of Prisoners. “Union members in El Paso want to know why prisoners of war are being allowed to roam the streets wearing U.S. Army uniforms without escort.” Fort Bliss officials explained

\begin{footnotes}
\item[219] Ibid., 24 September 1943.
\item[220] \textit{Fort Bliss News}, 30 September 1943.
\item[221] \textit{El Paso Times}, 8 October 1943.
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that members of the Italian Service Corps signed anti-fascist pledges and agreed to help the United States in its war effort against the axis.\textsuperscript{222}

German prisoners of war eventually included 1,800 men performing labor at Fort Bliss, mostly Afrika Korps veterans. Many more POWs were at branch camps nearby, in Fabens, Ysleta, Biggs Field, and Anthony, as well as New Mexico branches in Las Cruces, Hatch, Deming, Clovis, and Alamogordo.\textsuperscript{223} The German POWs at Fort Bliss did a wide variety of jobs, including being utilized in repair and paint shops, automobile and electric shops; they worked at typewriter repair, baking, carpentry, road and grounds improvements, and several other services jobs.\textsuperscript{224} Both Italian and German prisoners received a nominal amount of pay for their labor (80 cents a day) with the remainder impounded until the POWs were repatriated. Wages were set at 25 cents an hour for common labor and 30 cents for skilled. Cotton pickers earned $1.50 per one hundred pounds of short-staple cotton, but they were not skilled cotton pickers and were unlikely to earn more than three dollars a day.\textsuperscript{225}

The shock of discovery of the German concentration camps in the spring of 1945 induced prison camp officials across the U.S. to tighten regulations and restrictions. Four days before the war in Europe was declared over, the \textit{El Paso Times} informed its readers that “no longer will the Hitler salute or display of swastikas be allowed in German prisoner of war camps in the United States, including Fort Bliss”.\textsuperscript{226} Diets became more restricted, and beer, candy, and

\textsuperscript{222} \textit{El Paso Times}, 2 December 1944.

\textsuperscript{223} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 14 May 1945.


\textsuperscript{225} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 3 August 1943. Prices in 2010 were roughly twelve times those of the war period.

\textsuperscript{226} \textit{El Paso Times}, 4 May 1945. Surprisingly, Nazi symbols were permitted in prison camps before May, 1945.
cigarettes were no longer sold in the prison canteen. The clamp-down and tightening of restrictions emphasized that “coddling of prisoners or fraternizing or unnecessary verbal intercourse with them will not be tolerated. No conversation will be permitted with Prisoners of War at any time by anyone, except to issue instructions.”

It seems that before the new regulations there was a relaxed attitude toward the German POWs that shifted abruptly only after the public awareness of concentration camps. Even with the new limits, the German POWs had better living conditions than millions of people in war torn Europe.

Farm Labor on the Border

Agriculture held considerable sway over the economic and political power along the border, and indeed, across the country. In the El Paso area, cotton was king. The war brought great concerns about how to bring in the crop. Local farm workers had new opportunities for better paying jobs, or they had become part of the military. Even before the Bracero Program was underway in September 1942, Mexico was reluctant to send farm workers across the border. And once the program officially began, no braceros were allowed in Texas. Local newspapers reported the outrage of the cotton growers and muttered about red tape in Washington. Article after article headlines the shocked response of local growers. “Red Tape Chokes Army Cotton,” while “Farmers Demand Action on Plea for Workers.” Then there was a spate of optimism: “Immigration Chief Sees Swift Okay of Mexican Labor,” “Arrangements Completed to Import Laborers,” “McNutt [Paul McNutt, head of the War Manpower Commission] Promises

227 Fort Bliss News, 10 May 1945.
1,000 Pickers to Gather Valley’s Cotton. But all was for naught. The Mexican government refused to allow braceros to work in Texas, citing the discrimination that Mexicans encountered in the state.

Farmers were desperate for labor but not desperate enough to pay more than the going rate of $1.50 for picking one hundred pounds of cotton. They also resisted any efforts to improve working conditions. The *El Paso Times* opined on July 2, 1942, “A reasonable standard for cotton pickers is two hundred pounds a day.” That meant $3.00 per day for a skilled male picker; women and children would have earned considerably less. The Italian prisoners only averaged seventy pounds a day. The rate did not rise throughout the war, despite inflation and comfortable profits for the growers. The *El Paso Herald Post*, which usually was the more liberal of the two local papers, made short shrift of any discussion about wage increases. The paper disparaged the “talk about pay scales, as if the Valley farmers were seeking vice presidents instead of cotton choppers and the smart remarks about ‘real wages.’”

The *El Paso Times* editor, W.J. Hooten, described an OPC (Office of Price Control) ruling that employers had to furnish ice water to their braceros. Apparently that seemed an outrageous regulation. Hooten railed, “Next thing we know, someone will be insisting that the cotton fields be air-conditioned when the pickers start to work.”

Despite the angst expressed by the newspapers on behalf of the growers, the cotton did get picked. The 1942 crop did get picked, with the help of additional women and children in the fields. According to the local director of the War Manpower Commission, only two hundred

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228 *El Paso Herald Post*, 3 June, 6 June, 22 July, 7 August, 2 December, 1942.

229 Ibid., 3 July 1942.

230 *El Paso Times*, 23 October 1944.
workers needed to be imported. For more than a year, the local papers reported on continuing efforts to hire nearby Mexican labor. In 1942, some two thousand laborers in the Juarez area hoped for a chance at a job, and the cotton growers in El Paso County were eager to hire them. Although some El Paso farmers may have found a way to hire labor from across the river, no legal braceros were allowed in Texas. Mexico remained adamant that no braceros would be permitted in Texas. In 1943, the Times and the Herald Post continued the hopeful articles about hiring farm workers from across the border. In an attempt to gain Mexican farm labor, Texas Governor Coke Stevens issued a proclamation (which had no legal power) “to stamp out unjust discrimination.” He also set up a Good Neighbor Commission to receive complaints, but they were virtually powerless to act upon these complaints.

Mexican officials continued to reject requests from Texas. In July 1943, Mexico’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Ezequial Padilla wrote the Governor: “There are many places in your state where Mexican residents can not attend shows or places of decent amusement without exposing themselves to annoyance, criticism, and protest. There are towns where my countrymen are forced to live in certain sections. Not even the families of our official representatives are safe from such persecution or from unwanted molestation. Since Mexico continued to refuse sending braceros to Texas, local growers seemed finally to understand that there would be no legal importation of braceros.

In both 1942 and 1943 growers had to scramble to pick the cotton crop. Las Cruces businessmen, Army officers’ wives, and “several leading merchants” in El Paso were among

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231 Fred Wendt, El Paso Area Director of the War Manpower Commission to Regional Director J.A. Bond, Report of Progress for Week, 2 February 1943. Region Directors Reports, September 1942-January 1945. RG 211 Entry 84, Box 4, National Archives, College Park, MD.

232 El Paso Times, 29 July 1943.
those that said they would volunteer to pick cotton, at least according the local press.\textsuperscript{233} There seemed to be no evidence that they actually did so. The \textit{El Paso Times} thought that “many workers who have never been considered a part of the local farm labor supply, including women, older children and townspeople, may be needed in order to get wartime crops harvested.”\textsuperscript{234} Some 400 school children, ranging in age from twelve to eighteen years old, picked cotton in the fall of 1942. They were paid the standard rate of $1.50 per hundredweight and averaged (like the Italian POWs) seventy pounds daily, or only $1.05 per day.\textsuperscript{235} Despite the growers’ claim of severe labor shortages, the \textit{El Paso Times} noted that the cotton gins in the area were doing considerably more business than at the same time the previous year. The \textit{Times} editorial wondered “Who picked all the cotton if labor was so scarce?”\textsuperscript{236}

The cry for more workers continued into 1943. The \textit{Herald Post} reported that the plan to use soldiers to pick cotton in Arizona was denied by the Secretary of War Henry Stimson. “Further investigation has tended to show it may not be necessary for the Army to harvest the cotton crop.”\textsuperscript{237} But El Paso farmers did find sufficient workers as the war went on -- unauthorized farm workers from Mexico. World War II saw a great upsurge of illegal aliens, and American growers eagerly accepted them. In Texas, the growers had no recourse to braceros, but even in other states “wetbacks” (a derogatory term often applied to Mexicans illegally crossing the border) were welcomed because they accepted lower wages, and the

\textsuperscript{233} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 20 July 1942.

\textsuperscript{234} \textit{El Paso Times}, 19 September 1942.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 16 October, 23 October 1942.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 18 October, 1942.

\textsuperscript{237} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 25 February 1943.
farmers did not have to deal with any governmental demands. Then as now, many were apprehended after they waded the Rio Grande but many more found work. One difference then, however, was that farmers as well as illegal aliens were arrested, although the charges against the farmers tended to be dismissed. Farmers arrested included two who brought in only one illegal alien each, but two others were charged with smuggling sixteen Mexicans into the United States. The laborers themselves might be sentenced to as many as sixty days in jail.\footnote{El Paso Times 25 August 1942, 8 August, 8 October 1943; General Records of the Department of State Decimal Files 1940-1944, May 8 1943, Box 204, 812.00 Chihuahua/396. National Archives, College Park, MD}

For the month of April 1944 the Border Patrol district office in San Antonio deported 2,280 aliens, as compared to 715 in 1943 and only 284 in April 1942. “Mexican workers are streaming across the international line regardless of labor agreements between the United States and Mexico,” said an official from the U.S. Immigration Service.\footnote{El Paso Times, 22 May 1944.} By the following year, there were “hundreds being apprehended monthly” in the El Paso district alone.\footnote{Ibid., 12 March 1945} If hundreds were arrested every month one can assume that there were many hundreds more working on local farms. World War II was the beginning of what would later become a great influx of undocumented workers across the U.S.-Mexico border.

\section*{Organized Labor in Wartime}

The late 1930s were the time of a great surge in union activity. There were two principal labor organizations: the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the newer Congress of
Industrial Organizations (CIO). The AFL was comprised largely of craft unions, including bricklayers, railroad firemen, carpenters and boilermakers. The CIO, organized in 1935, had a considerably more leftist, sometimes radical, rank and file. It aimed to create industry-wide unions (like the United Auto Workers) rather than small crafts unions that had only loose alliances with each other.\(^{241}\) Further, the CIO recruited more semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, and it increased the number of black and Hispanic members. The New Deal promised support to labor; and unions became more powerful, especially after the Wagner Act of 1935. The Wagner Act gave workers the right to join unions and to bargain collectively. The Act established the National Labor Relations Board (later called the War Labor Board) with the power to protect the rights of most workers (but not agricultural or domestic workers). CIO union members, even more than AFL, benefited from the NLRB actions because they represented industry-wide workers. But the CIO scarcely had time to became well-established before the war began to influence their development as a national labor group. And while individual unions might remain militant, both the CIO and AFL leadership turned more cautious and bureaucratic.

Three months after Pearl Harbor, William Green, president of the AFL, and Philip Murray, chairman of the CIO, met with President Roosevelt at the White House and agreed to a no-strike pledge.\(^{242}\) Although the unions gave up the right to legal strikes, they gained in a number of ways. The Roosevelt administration’s National War Labor Board (WLB) backed many union benefits, including settlement of thousands of wage disputes and protection of union organizing. The WLB also helped union membership grow from seven million to about fifteen million.


members by the end of the war.

Still, wages often lagged behind wartime inflation, despite the imposition of both wage and price controls. John Jenkins, in *Wartime America* observed, “The no-strike pledge seemed to deprive workers of their chief weapon, but union leaders did not wish to violate it and risk losing influence in government agencies, inflaming anti-labor attitudes in Congress and among the public or seeming ungrateful to the Roosevelt administration.”

Although wages were kept in check, there were many ways that workers benefited from wartime changes. The WLB backed overtime pay and job upgrades that put more money in workers’ pockets. John Jeffries, points out the decision that prefigured the great postwar increases in benefits: workers, often for the first time, were the recipients of annual vacations and holiday pay, pensions, and health insurance.

Although unions gathered significant strength during the war, they also often reflected the growing conservatism of the country. They fought for better wages and working conditions, but they no longer saw the union movement as the social change agent that swept so many unions in the late 1930s.

In Texas, unions struggled with a political system that was dominated by agricultural interests, not industry. In the 1940s, the growers controlled both houses of the Texas legislature. The wartime Democratic party in the state reflected conservative, corporate interests. Texas unions were weak. Despite their lack of power, Governor (later Senator) W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel spent the war years railing against “labor leader racketeers.” Although Governor Coke Stevenson, who succeeded O’Daniel, was more amenable to labor, he did not

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244 Ibid., *Wartime America*, 56

oppose the 1945 Manford Bill. Under the bill, unions in Texas had to file detailed annual reports about all their financial and organizational records. These records were then essentially open to the public.\textsuperscript{246}

State laws restricted efforts at unionization. For example, conservatives in Texas supported a law requiring registration of all labor organizers. They could not solicit union membership without a license. J. Frank Dobie, a University of Texas professor, was outraged at the arrest of R.J. Thomas, of the United Auto Workers (part of the CIO). “A man can come to Texas and without interference invite all the people he wants to join the Republican Party, the Holy Rollers, the Associating for the Anointment of Herbert Hoover as Prophet, the Texas Folklore Society, the National Manufacturers Association -- almost any kind of organization -- except one. But it is against the law in Texas for a man unless he pays a license fee to invite, either publicly or privately, any person to join a labor union.”\textsuperscript{247} The following year, despite the anti-New Dealers, “Roosevelt’s popularity as wartime commander was still enormous in Texas” and Texas labor added in the reelection.\textsuperscript{248}

\textbf{Wage Conditions in El Paso}

During the war, El Paso attracted few new industries, maintaining its reputation as a low-wage city. The \textit{El Paso Herald Post} lamented, “The fact remains that El Paso has not

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\textsuperscript{247} \textit{El Paso Times}, 24 September 1943.

\textsuperscript{248} George N. Green, “Anti-Labor Politics in Texas,” 220.
\end{flushleft}
received war contracts. We have the climate, the copper, the cotton and the cattle, but we have been lost in the shuffle when it comes to payrolls created by war industries.” Not only was there not a significant war manufacturing presence, but El Paso’s reputation for cheap labor continued to be true. Domestic workers were at the bottom of the scale. In 1939 the average annual earnings for fulltime female domestic servants in Texas was only $258 a year or a mere five dollars a week. During the war, local want ads advertised for “Mexican or colored girl” maids for eight to ten dollars weekly. An “American” bar hostess could earn sixteen dollars—the wage remained the same in both 1941 and 1944. Beauty operator jobs were advertised at twenty-five dollars a week, more than most El Paso teachers or nurses were paid. One female bookkeeper job was advertised at thirty-six dollars a week, probably a munificent sum. Jobs for women and men were listed separately, and nearly always, male jobs paid more. In 1944, entry level wages at Phelps Dodge was advertised at twenty-five dollars a week, but an “experienced cow milker” got thirty dollars a week and a house to live in. Office-machine mechanics were offered forty-three dollars a week, and an automobile mechanic could earn fifty-seven dollars. These were low wages compared to those in war-industry cities. The local papers also regularly advertised better paying war jobs in other cities, especially on the West Coast. Throughout the war, El Paso was classified as “labor supply adequate and will continue to meet all known labor requirements,” and “moderate labor surplus” from November 1944 to May 1945.

Most El Paso unions were affiliated with either the AFL or the CIO. The longer

249 El Paso Herald Post, 30 August 1943.


251 From El Paso Times want ads 6 December 1941, 29 June, 5 September, 11 October, 1942, 19 September 1943, 12 February, 7 May, 17 October, 4 December 1944, 14 January 1945.
established AFL was prominently featured in the local labor newspaper, the *Labor Advocate*, which rarely mentioned the rival CIO. Although the paper announced a tentative “truce” between the AFL and the CIO in 1942, it did not endure.\(^{252}\) The two biggest industries in El Paso were the American Smelting and Refining Company (AS & R), with a payroll of seven hundred people, and the Phelps Dodge refinery, with about five hundred employees.\(^{253}\) By national standards, they were not large factories. Eventually both companies signed union agreements with the CIO. The battles between the AFL and CIO continued all across the country throughout the war. The newspapers described the ongoing fights for control in local companies. The CIO prevailed at Globe Mills, but the Darbyshire-Harvie Iron and Machine Company and the Peyton Packing Company employees chose the AFL.\(^{254}\)

**Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)**

Unions were able to expand their membership because of the support of the Roosevelt administration. But the President’s willingness to back efforts by the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to eliminate job description was much more muted. Executive Order 8802 of June 25, 1941, proclaimed that there should be “no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color or national origin.” But as author Clete Daniel describes, the “flimsy” enforcement authority of the FEPC confirmed suspicions that Executive Order 8802 was an expedient gesture rather than an honest

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\(^{252}\) *The Labor Advocate*, 11 December 1942.


\(^{254}\) *El Paso Times*, 4 June 1942; *El Paso Herald Post*, 5 March 1943; *El Paso Times*, 25 March 1943.
commitment to equal opportunities.”255 The purpose of the FEPC was not so much to combat
discrimination but rather to ensure the availability of manpower during the war. The impetus
for developing the FEPC came from the threat of a march on Washington by A. Philip Randolph,
head of the powerful black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other black
activists. President Roosevelt was able to thwart the planned March on Washington by
promising to establish a government committee to investigate complaints of discrimination in the
government and the rapidly growing defense industries. Most of the wartime efforts of the
FEPC were made in behalf of blacks, who had more national presence and were a much large
minority at the time. (Blacks represented 10 percent of the U.S. population in 1940 while
Hispanic constituted about 2 percent.)

The FEPC began to pay attention to Mexican American issues only in the late spring of
1942 after protests from Hispanic leaders in the Southwest, the reaction to studies conducted by
several federal agencies, and the continuous pressure exerted by the International Union of Mine,
Mill and Smelter Workers.256 The FEPC was pressured to hold public hearings in the
Southwest to address job discrimination against Mexican Americans. In May, the committee
decided to hold the hearings in El Paso, on August 14-15, 1942.257 The FEPC set up a temporary
office in El Paso on July 20th. The original person in charge of the office was C.J. Fleming. His
tenure lasted one day. Fleming was black and immediate pressure from many sides meant that
a white successor be immediately appointed. The new man in charge was Ernest Trimball,
jointly announced by Congressman R. E. Thomason, Presidential Secretary Marvin McIntyre,


256 Clete Daniel, Chicano Workers, 26.

and Lawrence Cramer, the executive secretary of the FEPC.²⁵⁸

But as early as June there were influential forces opposed to any such hearings. The State Department was adamant that the Good Neighbor Policy would be damaged by publicity about racial discrimination in the region. “Speaking for the Department, Under Secretary Sumner Wells on June 20, 1942, urged Roosevelt to prevent the pending FEPC hearing in El Paso.”²⁵⁹ David Saposs, a labor economist with the Office of International Affairs, had conducted a rapid field survey on Mexican Americans in the Southwest. He noted in his weekly program report, “The State Department, we are told, fears that open hearings of the FEPC at this time might effect adversely our good relations with the other American Republics.”²⁶⁰ While the State Department successfully lobbied President Roosevelt to cancel the public hearings, the FEPC was “never formally consulted by either the White House or the State Department at any stage of the decision-making process that sealed the fate of the El Paso hearings.”²⁶¹ The El Paso FEPC team unwittingly continued to prepare for the planned August meeting. In anticipation, the Mine Mill organizers held a mass meeting in El Paso’s Smeltertown (where many American Smelting and Refining workers lived) on August 4.²⁶² But the next day the El Paso Herald Post announced that the FEPC hearings had been postponed to a later date.

²⁵⁸ El Paso Herald Post, 20 July 1942, 22 July, 1942. Fleming continued as an investigator for the project after being superseded by Trimble.


²⁶⁰ Daniel J. Saposs, Office of Inter-American Affairs, Department of Basic Economy, Records Relating Minorities, Weekly Progress Report July 2-30, 1942, RG 229, Box 1717, National Archives, College Park, MD.

²⁶¹ Clete Daniel, Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness, 142.

²⁶² Leo Ortiz to Allan McNiel, International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, 6 August 1942, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Archives.
In fact, they were never held. The FEPC office in El Paso closed after only two months. Nonetheless, Trimble and his staff continued to investigate complaints of unfair employment practices against Mexican American workers, particularly the entrenched dual wage system that kept them in the lowest pay ranks. But the committee was constrained by the lack of interest from their parent agency, the War Manpower Commission. The FEPC also faced a powerful copper industry in the Southwest that was producing vital war materiel. The large metal industries could, with impunity, ignore the FEPC allegations.

All across the country, the FEPC was losing ground in its efforts to lessen discrimination in employment. By early 1943, supporters were pushing for its rehabilitation as an independent entity. Executive Order 9346, issued on May 23, 1943, placed the FEPC as an independent agency within the Office for Emergency Management and directly responsible to the President. Although this seemed to auger a newly instituted and stronger FEPC, “insofar as enforcement powers were concerned, Executive Order 9346 left the FEPC in the same unhappy predicament in which it had found itself under the original order.” The committee could investigate discrimination but only on behalf of individual complaints. It was clear to the FEPC that the copper companies were discriminating against Mexican American workers as a group, not just on an individual basis, but the committee was politically unable to address the larger issue.

The FEPC field investigation in 1943 found virtually the same dual wage standards that existed in the previous year. In the fall of 1943, a University of Texas history professor, Carlos Castaneda, was appointed to oversee a second investigation of discrimination against Mexican American and Mexican nationals. “Yet despite the committee’s apparent resolve and Carlos

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Castaneda’s personal ardor, the likelihood that Chicano copper workers would at last realize the promise of fair treatment embodied in the president’s nondiscrimination order was no greater in the spring of 1944 than it had been in the fall of 1942.”  The copper companies throughout the Southwest, including Phelps Dodge and AS &R in El Paso, continued their successful denial of any meaningful change in wage and employment policies.  Castaneda and two assistants visited every important mining, milling, smelting and refining operation in the Southwest during the spring of 1944.265

Castaneda was in El Paso twice in April. According to the *El Paso Times* headline, Castaneda’s survey shows no El Paso race differences. The paper reported that no serious conditions of economic discrimination in El Paso “as far as determined now.”  Castaneda hedged his bets by saying, “As yet we have no definite facts, but if any such discrimination exists, we will know about them within two weeks,”266 Castaneda was muted and cautious in his comments to the *El Paso Times*, but much more forthright and critical in his reports to the FEPC. “Both the American Smelter and Phelps Dodge Companies have been aware for the last two or three months of the need of avoiding all appearance of discrimination.  They have, consequently, given employment to Latin Americans in departments where they were never employed before, but in restricted numbers, just sufficient to avoid charges of discrimination.”267

In February 1945, Castaneda became regional director for Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Louisiana, but the FEPC did not endure much past the end of the war.  Although


265 Ibid., 166.

266 *El Paso Times*, 9 April 1944.

267 Cleve Daniel, *Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness*, 168. Castaneda’s report was written on April 26, 1944.
FEPC supporters dreamed of a permanent government institution, the increasingly conservative Congress fought to close down the agency.

Southern congressmen were especially anxious to deny FEPC any further funding. In June 1945 several senators launched a filibuster to deny funds to the FEPC. Senator Theodore Bilbo (D-Miss.) promised, “I will talk until christmas [sic] if necessary to stop funds for a lot of peckerwoods to go around and meddle into other peoples’ business.” The filibuster ended with a compromise in time to pass the FY 46 budget. Although the agency was awarded 250,000 dollars, it was a far cry from its earlier budgets, and was not enough to sustain the agency.

Castaneda announced the closing of the San Antonio FEPC office on December 15 “due to lack of funds.” By the following spring, FEPC closed for good. As Malcolm Ross, the agency’s last director, summarized: “FEPC was never armed with the authority to do a proper job. It was a wartime makeshift.” It remained for the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers to take up the cudgels.

**International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers**

The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill) sprang from the Western Federation of Miners, dating back to 1883. It became Mine-Mill in 1916, but labor unions in general faired poorly in the 1920s and during the first years of the Depression.

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269 Felix D. Almarez, Jr., *Knight Without Armor* (College Park: Texas A&M University Press, 1999.)

Mine-Mill broke its affiliation with the AFL in 1935 to support the newly created CIO. Across the Southwest, Mine-Mill began organizing workers, and they made significant inroads with Mexican Americans who worked in copper mines and smelters. Mine-Mill was a strong supporter of minority workers, and they were aware that an important constituency in the Southwest was Mexican Americans. As Josiah Heyman observed of Douglas, Arizona, “The nonracial philosophy of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, in which the leadership level between Anglo and Mexican American was visible to all, signified a new paradigm of social relations for this old company town.”

One of the issues the union fought hard, and eventually successfully, against was the dual wage system that paid Mexican and Mexican American workers less than Anglos. Their other major battle was to support those workers who were virtually excluded from skilled job classifications. Yet Reid Robinson, the leftist president of the union, cautioned one of his organizers who planned a Mexican Labor Day rally in Arizona: “Every effort must be made to guard against using a production rally solely for Spanish-speaking workers to deepen the gap between them and the Anglos.” Robinson believed that the rally would be more successful with the participation of Anglo workers “since the question of production applies equally to them.”

Nonetheless, the strength of Mine-Mill in El Paso and throughout much of the Southwest was in organizing Mexican Americans. Mine-Mill struggled to gain a foothold in the Southwest’s mines and smelter. They had to contend with adamant opposition by the copper companies, led by Phelps Dodge, as well as most AFL craft unions. Reid Robinson observed

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272 Reid Robinson to Leo Ortiz, 18 May 1942. International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Papers, Western History Collection, Box 41-3, University of Colorado at Boulder Library.
that “as a further discouragement to legitimate unionism, employers, again led by Phelps Dodge, routinely discharged workers who persisted in their activism even though the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 expressly prohibited discrimination.”\textsuperscript{273} It was also Mine-Mill that manifested the most vigorous support to the efforts of the FEPC to address job discrimination in the copper industry. In general, there were two completely different labor systems for Anglos and Mexicans.\textsuperscript{274} Ethnic Mexicans rarely had a chance to rise further than entry-level labor jobs, the “so-called Mexican jobs.”\textsuperscript{275}

Mine-Mill representatives Harry Hafner and Leo Ortiz prepared a statement for an FEPC meeting in El Paso on July 30, 1942. They reported that Anglo workers were immediately given a higher rate of pay when they were hired. There was “a familiar litany of unfair practices: denial of equal wages for equal work; denial of promotion to skilled job classifications; denials to equal access to employer-owned housing, recreation and medical facilities.”\textsuperscript{276} Labor organizer Humberto Silex recalled that in 1937 at Asarco in El Paso a common laborer received $2.06 for a ten to twelve hour day and worked six days a week. The prospects of a promotion were dim. “The result was that an hispanic could die there as a helper for he would never be promoted to assistant.”\textsuperscript{277}

\textsuperscript{273} Reid Robinson to Leo Ortiz, 18 May 1942.

\textsuperscript{274} Clete Daniel, \textit{Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness}, 34.


\textsuperscript{277} Humberto Silex interview by Oscar Martinez and Art Sadin, 28 April 1978, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, 15.
The commitment of Mine-Mill to Hispanic workers was significant in organizing the two largest companies in El Paso: Phelps Dodge and American Smelting and Refining (AS & R). The Phelps Dodge Refinery was said to be the second largest in the world.278 Thus, Phelps Dodge not only served as a leader of the copper companies but also practiced fierce resistance to any change in their hiring and employment procedures. Both companies continued to support the dual wage system. Although in principle Phelps Dodge had to adhere to the President’s Executive Order 8802 and the later Executive Order 9346, the powerful company could largely ignore the rulings since the need for copper in wartime was essential, and the Roosevelt administration was not enthusiastically enforcing FEPC orders. Further, Mine Mill organizers Harry Hafner and Leo Ortiz thought that the universally low wages for all workers “plays one race off against another.”279 Nonetheless, Phelps Dodge was among the highest paying El Paso employer of laborers. In 1943, the El Paso Herald Post reported that Phelps Dodge “wages are the highest paid in El Paso for common laborers, 61 ¼ cents an hour.”280 But these prevailing wages were significantly lower than in other parts of the country, and many El Paso workers sought higher-paying jobs out of town. This alarmed Phelps Dodge and AS & R, who claimed a shortage of up to 251 workers in early 1944.281 But both companies resisted wage increases. The Chamber of Commerce weighed in with a “program for effective educational

278 El Paso Herald Post, 28 October 1943.

279 Statement of Harry Hafner and Leo Ortiz, 30 July 1942.

280 El Paso Herald Post, 28 October 1943. The wages would still be only the current equivalent of $13,000 annually.

advertisements,” apparently to convince unskilled laborers to apply for local jobs. Fred Wendt, area director of the War Manpower Commission, assured the Chamber that El Paso had a sufficient amount of labor to draw from.\footnote{El Paso Times, 25 February 1944.} A year later, Phelps Dodge continued to resist pay increases. Their attorney enjoined, “High wages tend to increase absenteeism in critical war plants and are detrimental to the best war efforts.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Mine-Mill also had to deal with the reluctance of AFL unions to support company-wide unions and Mexican membership. Since the AFL and CIO were often not in accord, that made labor negotiations and progress more difficult. Both Phelps Dodge and AS & R originally had either a company union or a collusive AFL craft union which supported the dual wage system. For example, in 1939, the AFL-affiliated company union at AS & R negotiated an hourly raise of 1½ cents for laborers, 5 cents for semi-skilled, and 10 cents for skilled workers.\footnote{Humberto Silex interview by Raymond Caballero, September 1991 and May 1992, Vertical Files, Special Collections, University of Texas at El Paso Library.} Asked how they justified the dual recompense, Silex replied ironically: “They justified it by saying that Mexicans only ate frijoles, that the majority went around barefoot and didn’t need shoes, and that they wore only the cheapest clothing.”\footnote{Humberto Silex interview by Oscar J. Martinez and Art Sadin, 28 April 1978, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.}

Despite the resistance of the copper companies and the AFL unions, Mine-Mill did make progress throughout the Southwest. In El Paso, Mine-Mill began its initial organizing in late 1939 and early 1940 with the arrival of James Robinson, the father of the union president Reid Robinson. They initiated the additional help of an experienced organizer from the
Confederacion de Trabajadores (CTF) in Juarez. The CTF man, along with Robinson and Humberto Silex, began organizing. This was the beginning if a seven-year struggle to attain significant advances for the Mine-Mill members. Humberto Silex was one of the leaders. His name was originally Siles, “but when I was very young I looked that up in the dictionary and it wasn’t there. I felt a man’s name should mean something. The next word down in the dictionary was Silex and from then on that’s how I spelled my name.” Silex was born in Nicaragua and came to the United States at the age of 18 in 1921. He was a skilled worker when he was hired by AS & R in 1938, but nonetheless was put on as a helper, the lowest category of laborer. In 1940, Local 509 of the Mine-Mill was established with Silex as Secretary. In June of that year, Silex had been fired for union activity but eventually was reinstated by a National Labor Review Board (NLRB) ruling. Without the NLRB it is probable that Mine-Mill would not have been able to recruit successfully. For example, in February 1941, the NLRB ordered Phelps Dodge to “cease and desist” from discouraging union activities at the El Paso plant. That same year, Mine-Mill filed similar complaints against the AS & R smelter. Yet both companies continued to resist.

In August 1942, Leo Ortiz of Mine-Mill reported that Phelps Dodge refused to negotiate without first consulting with their New York office. “They refused to set up a Labor and Management Production Committee or to set up any method for the settlement of grievances.”

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286 Frank Arnold, “Humberto Silex,” 15. “Silex” means “glass that is resistant to heat” and originally was the Latin word for flint.


289 Leo Ortiz to Ben Riskin, 19 August 1942, International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Papers, Western History Collection, Box 43-1, University of Colorado at Boulder Library.

In late 1943, in El Paso, Phelps Dodge agreed to a Mine-Mill contract in 1943, and AS & R signed a contract in April of 1944 but retroactive to September 1943. Both companies finally recognized the two Mine-Mill locals as the sole bargaining agents. The Phelps Dodge contract, similar to the one at AS & R, provided “for a union check-off to ensure that the union received dues from members. Working hours were set at 40 hours per week and any employee working more than eight hours would be paid 1 ½ times.” The El Paso Times also reported that the company had consented to an immediate wage increase of 11 ½ cents an hour, and workers would receive one week’s vacation at full pay. Humberto Silex continued in leadership roles and was elected President of Local 509 in 1943 and in 1944. But he was fired from AS & R again in October 1945 “for union activities.” In late 1945 he was hired by Mine-Mill as a national representative covering Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada. His later life did not continue this trajectory of success, but during the war he was lauded by the nationally known labor activist Carey McWilliams as “one of the outstanding labor leaders in the

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290 El Paso Herald Post, 7 September 1942.


292 El Paso Times, 11 April 1944.

293 Mario T. Garcia, Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 189-190.

294 Frank Arnold, “Humberto Silex,” 9,10.
Connections with Mexican Labor

Part of the success of Mine-Mill rested in the strong connections with workers and unions across the border. In both 1942 and 1943, Mine-Mill members were major participants in cross-border celebrations. It was clear to Mexican-American labor leaders that labor rallies which included Mexican holidays “represented good organizing tactics among Mexican-American workers in the Southwest.”

The first International Labor Day gala was held on September 7, 1942, with an estimated 10,000 marchers in El Paso and Juárez. The organizers in both cities planned an elaborate program beginning with a flag raising at 7:15 a.m. and not closing until street dancing finished at midnight. In between there was a breakfast, luncheon and dinner banquet, and a parade that took place on both sides of the border. Chairman of the Celebration Committee Robert Scott urged union members of the El Paso area “to ‘slap a Jap’ and make some contribution to the war effort by marching with our Brothers from Mexico and showing to the world the solidarity of Labor from these two great American Countries.”

The Labor Day festivities were supported by both city mayors and included military bands and military units from both countries. “The grave conditions in which the world finds itself

295 Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 199.


297 International Labor Day Celebration Committee, 28 August 1942, International Mine, Mill and Smeller Workers Papers, Western History Collection, Box 41-3, University of Colorado at Boulder Library.
lends to this celebration particular importance,” President Avila Camacho’s message said.\(^\text{298}\) The *El Paso Times* described the border-crossing parade as first of its kind in the history of the two republics, the largest ever seen in El Paso and Juarez. As the Mexican section stepped on U.S. soil, it noted that “hundreds of spectators broke into applause and cheers.”\(^\text{299}\) When the celebration was held, the U.S. army had been at war only nine months and was still struggling with the first assaults on Guadalcanal in the Pacific. Mexico had only declared war three months before this Labor Day celebration. So the day’s activities were not simply celebratory but reflected the urgency of fighting the Axis.

The following year there were two labor celebrations, beginning with an International Labor Day parade on May 1, 1943.\(^\text{300}\) Mexican workers, joined by representatives of El Paso labor organizations, “today staged the largest International Labor Day parade ever held in Juarez.”\(^\text{301}\) Shortly thereafter, the two border cities joined to commemorate July Fourth and to hear the famous Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano speak to crowds in both El Paso and Juarez. Toledano was president of the Confederation of Latin American Workers, which was holding a conference in Mexico City. The final session took place in El Paso on July Fourth. Powerful Latin American labor leaders pledged the full co-operation of workers below the Rio Grande in winning the war.\(^\text{302}\) The connection between Juarez and El Paso union members continued in 1945 and lasted into the postwar era for a few additional years.

\(^{298}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 7 September 1942.

\(^{299}\) *El Paso Times*, 7 September 1942.

\(^{300}\) Labor Day is usually celebrated on May 1st around the world; the U.S. September Labor Day is an exception.

\(^{301}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 1 May 1943.

\(^{302}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 18 June 1943; *El Paso Times*, 5 July 1943.
Conclusion

For many people, there was a distinct fear that the postwar economy would cause real hardship. One survey concluded that seven out of ten Americans expected lower wages. Only 37 percent believed that their children would have a better opportunity after the war than they themselves enjoyed.³⁰³ “Most of the Administration’s thinking of postwar problems has followed the depression pattern, taking for granted that the end of the war will be the start of an indefinite period of hard times.”³⁰⁴ Yet these dire predictions generally did not come to pass, thanks in part to the GI Bill. More formally known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the GI Bill “created social options and expectations far beyond its initial intention.”³⁰⁵

The GI Bill is best known for opening up education opportunities for veterans, and the College of Mines in El Paso is a striking example. During the Depression years of 1934 and 1935 college enrollment dropped to 668 students. But by the 1946-47 school year, enrollment soared to 2,250.³⁰⁶ The GI Bill paid full tuition for veterans. In addition, there were loan guarantees for a home, farm or business, and there was guaranteed unemployment compensation for an entire year. As President Roosevelt said in a fireside chat, “They must not be demobilized into an environment of inflation and unemployment, to a place on a bread line or on a corner

³⁰³ El Paso Times, 2 August 1944.
³⁰⁴ El Paso Herald Post, 16 August 1943.
selling apples.” While the GI Bill significantly altered the negative postwar expectations, it applied only to those 12 million people who served in the armed forces.

Workers across America engaged in widespread strikes in 1946. The AFL and CIO had agreed to a non-strike pledge during the war, and most union members adhered to these agreements. But there was bent-up demand for wage increases that erupted in the 1946 strikes across the country. In El Paso, a thousand Mine-Mill members at AS & R and Phelps Dodge joined an extensive nationwide strike that lasted from late February to mid-June. The two Mine-Mill locals set up a relief committee to raise funds for the neediest strikers. They raised over five thousand dollars, including one thousand collected by community activist Molly Shapiro. Mine-Mill negotiated a settlement that raised workers’ hourly wages by 18 ½ cents an hour. Strike leader Humberto Silex exalted, “We are the best paid workers in the Southwest now.” Not only were they better paid, but they also became eligible to apply for the skilled craftsmen positions, such as electricians, crane operators, and motormen. Despite Mine-Mill’s successful negotiations, the union was not to endure. Increasingly conservative attitudes looked with suspicion on the left-leaning union. In 1950, Mine-Mill was expelled from the CIO over its refusal to purge any communists from its ranks. The U.S. Steelworkers, the CIO’s replacement union, made tremendous inroads in Mine-Mill locals, from which they never recovered. In 1967, a severely weakened Mine-Mill merged with the Steelworkers and

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309 Mario T. Garcia, Mexican Americans, 193.

ceased to exist as a separate entity.\textsuperscript{311}

Although the union succeeded in raising wages and reducing discrimination at AS & R and Phelps Dodge, other blue collar workers in the region did not enjoy similar improvements. The cheap labor system in the El Paso area continued to survive, but on a reduced level. Carey McWilliams described an unidentified Mexican American who enlisted in the army at the beginning of the war and rose to the rank of captain “On leaving the service this man tried to find some employment offering better opportunities, but after a few months he applied for his old position.”\textsuperscript{312} Mexican Americans in El Paso similarly discovered that, despite the changes of World War II, new opportunities were limited for many of them as they came home from the war.

The Bracero Program for farm labor was not legal in Texas until 1947. But local agriculture was supplied by illegal immigrants both during the war and afterwards. Cotton pickers, for example, continued to earn pittance wages of $1.50 per hundred pounds. In the late 1940s, a Border Patrol inspector described working conditions as far below anyone’s standard of decency. “Wages in the local labor market were depressed, working conditions remained at minimal levels, and the organization of labor unions was hampered by the ready availability of large numbers of alien workers.”\textsuperscript{313} The war did bring changes to El Paso, but cheap labor remained a potent example of border economy.

\textsuperscript{311} James E. Foster, \textit{American Legion in the Southwest}, 17.


\textsuperscript{313} Patricia Reschenthaler, “Postwar Readjustment in El Paso,” \textit{Southwest Studies}, Vol. VI, Number 1, 1968, Texas Western Press, University of Texas at El Paso.
One day in the fall of 1939, Martin Armagnac read a notice in an El Paso, Texas, newspaper. It announced that the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was accepting officer candidate applications. The United States would not be a combatant in World War II for another two years, but Martin and his friends expected that eventually they would be part of the war. Martin had taken four years of ROTC at El Paso’s Austin High School and, as a college sophomore at the College of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso, already had three years’ experience in the National Guard. He liked the military and wanted to sign on. Immediately he went to the ROTC office and applied. The officer was regretful; all the positions were filled. Disappointed, Martin turned to leave. As he went out, he ran into a former high school classmate. On a hunch, Martin waited for his friend. In a few minutes the classmate came out beaming— he had been accepted as a future reserve officer. Martin’s friend had not been to college and had no ROTC or National Guard training. Why was the friend accepted and not Martin?314 “Because he was an ‘American,’” thought Martin. Martin was an American as well, but mostly of Mexican descent (his last name came from a French grandfather). In Texas of pre-World War II days, “Americans” were white, non-Hispanic residents; “Mexicans” were everyone of Mexican descent, whether their families had lived in Texas for two hundred years or had arrived the day before.

During the early twentieth century, Texas had earned a long-standing reputation for discrimination and violence against ethnic Mexicans. While Mexican Americans all over the

314Martin Armagnac, interview by author, 19 October 1995.
Southwest experienced some degree of segregation and discrimination, Texas was the home of segregation on all fronts. Many schools were segregated, although there was no basis in law for the segregation of Mexican American students, as there was for blacks. The de facto segregation in most Texas towns was strongest in the earliest grades. But few Mexican American children made it past grammar school, making segregation in the higher grades nearly a moot point. Mexican Americans were often denied access to public places. Sometimes parks and swimming pools were officially or unofficially closed to Hispanics; restaurants, barber shops, and hotels might refuse service to Mexicans. Police brutality was a fact of life in many Texas communities, including beatings and pistol whipping. Real estate restrictions meant that towns were regularly divided between “little Mexicos” and the “Anglo” part of town. Discrimination in employment was widespread. Few Mexican Americans before World War II could even aspire to skilled laborer jobs, and Mexican workers usually were paid less than Anglos, even when performing similar labor. 315

Yet in Texas, there was often a difference along the Texas-Mexico border. Perhaps part of Martin Armagnac’s bitterness stemmed from the unexpected rejection as an officer candidate. He had graduated from high school, attended college, and was on his way to becoming a mining engineer. He and many Hispanic El Pasoans of his era would say that the discrimination they experienced was milder than elsewhere in Texas. Anglos too recognized that there were differences along the border. A grower from South Texas admitted, “We segregate the Mexican here. They have their own town. On the border they mix…On the border you do business with the Mexicans and they were a great social class there once. You can’t be quite so

Nonetheless, there was discrimination of one kind or another against Hispanics on the border as well -- whether overt or subtle. It hampered countless activities of daily life and closed most doors to social, economic, and political power. The war did open opportunities in Texas for thousands of Mexican Americans in the armed services and war industries. At the same time, the pressures to assimilate were greater. The war brought added tensions as well. Wartime Texas did not experience violent episodes between Anglos and Mexican Americans like the anti-Mexican zoot suit riots that broke out in Los Angeles. Nor were there any well-publicized legal cases like the Sleepy Lagoon Case in California. Nonetheless, discrimination remained widespread across the state.\textsuperscript{317}

While the zoot suit represented a uniform of alienated Mexican American youth, other Mexican Americans were already using another kind of uniform as a symbol and a shield against discrimination. Just days after Pearl Harbor, a Hispanic father charged an Anglo El Paso County Highway Patrolman with showing disrespect for the U.S. Army uniform and for discriminating against persons of Spanish American extraction. The father contacted the \textit{El Paso Times} and told the newspaper that the patrolman “handcuffed my son to an iron post in the main street of Fabens and held him there for about an hour without respect for the uniform of the United States Army that my son is (sic) wearing.”\textsuperscript{318}

Mexican Americans across the country joined or were drafted into the military in record numbers. Estimates of those who served range as high as 750,000—a very high figure in a

\textsuperscript{316} Quoted in David Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 253.

\textsuperscript{317} David G. Gutierrez, \textit{Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 131.

\textsuperscript{318} \textit{El Paso Times}, 11 December 1941.
Mexican American population that was probably between two and three million in 1940.\textsuperscript{319} More common are estimates of between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexican-American servicemen and women, and there may have been as many as 15,000 Mexican nationals serving in the U.S. military as well. The reason there were not accurate figures is that “Mexican American” or “Latin American” were not official classifications of the U.S. military, which considered Hispanics to be white and assigned them to white, as opposed to all-black units. In any case, the consensus seems to be that Mexican Americans were in the service at a higher percentage than any other ethnic group.\textsuperscript{320} The local \textit{El Continental} newspaper eagerly supported the troops and featured Mexican American soldiers in many articles. Both the \textit{El Paso Times} and the \textit{Herald Post} continuously followed the activities of El Pasoans in the military, and featured both Anglos and Mexican Americans, including headlines like “Army Honors Mexican Youth with Award of Purple Heart” and “Hero of Battle Mountain [Montebattaglia, Italy] Is Young Latin American.”\textsuperscript{321}

World War II was a watershed in the lives of hundreds of millions of people, and the area on the United States-Mexico border was no exception. Along the border, no Americans and few Mexicans escaped being touched in some fashion by the war. Socially, politically, and economically, the major border cities were clearly different by the time the war was over. This chapter will examine the degree of continuity and changes for Mexican Americans that occurred in the second largest of the twin cities along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border: El Paso, Texas/Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. It will argue that the war indeed began to change the lives of

\textsuperscript{319} Alfonso S. Perales, \textit{Are We Good Neighbors?}, (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 62.

\textsuperscript{320} U.S. Latino and Latina & World War II Conference. Panel of “Latin Educating and World War II;” Carey McWilliams, \textit{North From Mexico} and Raul Morin, \textit{Among the Valiant}.

\textsuperscript{321} \textit{El Paso Times}, 27 October 1944, 20 February 1945.
Mexican Americans along the border concerning the patterns of segregation and discrimination. Nonetheless, the resistance from the Anglo community and the availability of cheap labor from across the border slowed progress. The economic and political changes brought the beginnings of social transformation. The Southwest’s largest minority had long been the target of discrimination that impacted nearly every aspect of their daily lives. In the land of freedom and opportunity, there was little of either for most people of Mexican origin. Inevitably, the war fought to maintain freedoms throughout the world would begin to make it impossible to maintain the old walls of discrimination at home.

This chapter examines national and state relations with Mexican Americans and, more profoundly, discusses the Mexican American experience in the borderland. The discrimination and segregation took many forms, including refusal of service in public places, real estate and housing restrictions, school segregation, limited employment opportunities, and restrictions in voting and political life.

**Federal Government View of Mexican Americans**

Since nearly all Mexican-origin people in the United States lived in the Southwest and in 1940 constituted only about two percent of the total U.S. population, they were virtually unknown in the Midwest and on the East Coast. The “Mexican problem” was scarcely mentioned in the rest of the country. George I. Sanchez book, aptly titled *The Forgotten People* was published in 1940. No doubt, readers outside the southwestern United States had much

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322 The U.S. Census tabulated 132 million population in 1940.

to learn about Mexican Americans. When war came, most of the federal government agencies seemed at first to ignore Mexican Americans. In 1940 the newly formed Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs was soon fascinated by the “forgotten people.” The Office rushed to write papers, hold conferences, grant funds—all with the aim of explaining Spanish Americans to one another and to the United States. It described a people who were “probably the most submerged and destitute group in the United States; communities are very static, individuals are apathetic and fatalistic.” David Saposs, a labor economist with the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, worried that “resident Latin Americans can become easy prey of subversive propaganda and un-American teachings. Sinarquisti [members of a rightwing, Axis-influenced group in Mexico] and similar subversive elements are already active. Communists are insidiously attempting to entrench themselves as leaders of these people.”

In a paper about “The Spanish Americans of the Southwest and the War Effort,” an assistant director wrote that ignorance was the common denominator. He and other officials worried about Axis propaganda making inroads because “these people are volatile and politically naïve. This vulnerability to excitement and their sub marginal standard of living offers fertile ground for Axis propaganda.” The writer also claimed that they “do not know what the war is about and, in many cases, don’t even know who are our allies, who our enemies.”

Officials also seemed to have great faith in the restorative effects of public relations. David Saposs thought that an intelligent public relations policy would cope successfully with “this element.” The unnamed writer of “Spanish Americans and the War Effort” counseled how

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325 Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, RG 229, Box 1717. “The Spanish Americans of the Southwest and the War Effort.” 19 May, 1942: 1-2, National Archives, College Park, MD.
to reach “these people” who were so isolated and ignorant. He recommended involving the Spanish-language press, including the daily *El Continental* and the weekly *Revista Catolica* in El Paso. And he cautioned, “Assume no previous knowledge about the war on the part of the reader.” Other suggested public relations outlets were Spanish language radio with its “simple colloquial playlets,” a manual in Spanish about the war (“the impressiveness of such a booklet to these simple people would be difficult to exaggerate”), decorative posters, mail (“mail is a rarity to these people; its receipt is viewed as a genuine symbol of personal importance”) and short Spanish-language films.326

Another white paper suggested that discrimination had been increasing since the war began. The solution? More PR—“an educational campaign which would enlighten the dominant population groups on the background and the contributions of these Spanish speaking peoples.”327 “Success in correcting abuses and maladjustment, from which the resident Latin Americans suffer, will depend on long and painstaking effort based on the maintenance of intelligent public relations.”328 Victor Borella, director of Inter-American Relations within the United States, visited El Paso in 1944. Borella said that the relations between Anglo-Americans and Spanish-Americans within the United States have a direct bearing on the war effort of all the Americas.329 In general, the experts seemed to share an overwhelmingly paternalistic view of Mexican Americans. But they did recognize that widespread

326 Ibid., 3,7-8.

327 “Problem of Resident Latin Americans.” Conference with Dr. Will W. Alexander, Chief, Minorities Section, War Production Board, National Archives RG 229, Box 1717, 3 February, 1942.

328 “Resident Latin American Protection League,” Cultural Relations Division, Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, 1 January, 1942.

discrimination had deleterious effects in inadequate education, increased juvenile delinquency, underemployment, and a prevalence of disease and malnutrition. One passionate and eloquent prospectus was prepared for the Office of Inter-American Affairs on “The Mexican Americans of Southwestern United States” by John Bright and Josefina Fierro de Bright.

Josefina Fierro de Bright was a young woman of Mexican background whose mother had been part of the radical Flores Magon brothers’ group at the turn of the century. Josefina was a leader of the left-wing Congress of Spanish Speaking Peoples. Her husband was a political supporter of the group and a filmmaker. The Brights understood the circumstances under which most Mexican Americans faced discrimination in the United States. “The living conditions are indubitably the meanest of any in the country, unmatched except by the Negroes of the deep South. Death and birth rates are outrageously high, health levels degraded, housing pathetic. Economic opportunities equally restricted. The attitude of local and federal agencies has been, until the war, parallel with the employers, who have been solely concerned with the maintenance of a supply of cheap labor.330

The American Embassy in Mexico weighed in with a fact-finding trip along the border from Tijuana to Matamoros. Two diplomats visited leading American citizens in every principal border town. The embassy did not share the fervent belief in the efficacy of public relations. Joseph McGuire, the Charge d’Affaires, concluded that neither newspaper and radio campaigns, nor any other kinds of mass propaganda, would achieve the desired results of eliminating discrimination. “On the other hand,” he wrote, “most Americans consulted felt that discriminations could be eliminated if the patriotic sentiments of Texans were appealed to. That is, if leading citizens of Texas towns and cities understood the need for Mexican

330 John Bright and Josefina Fierro de Bright, “Prospectus for the Office of Inter-American Affairs on the Mexican-Americans of Southwestern United States,” RG 229, Box 1717, 10 November, 1942, National Archives, College Park, MD.
government cooperation during the war, they could act as ‘vigilantes’ in their communities to see to it that discrimination disappeared.” By and large then, important Anglo-Americans seemed to be convinced that friendly persuasion to patriotic ends would be the answer to the “Mexican problem.” The state government of Texas also often approached discrimination in this way.

State Government and Mexican Americans

The Mexican government’s exclusion of Texas from the Bracero Program forced a few mild concessions from the state’s political leaders. In August 1943, Governor Coke Stevenson established the Good Neighbor Commission to placate the Mexican government and with the hope of persuading Mexico to rescind the ban on braceros working in Texas. The Mexican government had imposed the ban because of Texas’ unenviable reputation for rank discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Throughout the war, braceros were not permitted in the state of Texas, and the ban was not lifted until 1947. Dorrance Roderick, publisher of the El Paso Times, was named chairman of the first six-man commission. The task of the Good Neighbor Commission was to address discrimination against people of Mexican descent in Texas, with the hope that the Mexican government would relent. According to Roderick, they hoped to bring about a better understanding among Texans through educational

331 Letter from Joseph F. McGuire, Charge d’Affaires ad Interim, Mexico City, to The Secretary of State, Washington 4 February, 1942, RG 229, Box 1717, National Archives, College Park, MD

332 President Roosevelt had established a “Good Neighbor Policy” during the 1930s to improve relations with Latin America. The name was borrowed from this political and diplomatic effort. See also Emilio Zamora, Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2009), 25.
means. In fact, that was almost the only method that the Commission had at its disposal. The Commission had no authority to make legislative changes or to regulate conditions of discrimination. Roderick declared that “Axis agents in Latin American countries are citing isolated instances in which Mexicans have been discriminated against. Pictures of signs which have been placed in cafes and other establishments denying service to Mexicans have been photographed and circulated by enemy agents in Latin America.”

During its nine-year existence, the Good Neighbor Commission did not live up to its potential. Historian Everett Ross Clinchy argued that a major reason that the Commission was not very successful was the political and social climate of Texas that emphasized individualism and the last frontier, and the reluctance of government-- state or federal -- to “interfere” in social and economic problems. Another reason that the Good Neighbor Commission did not make many strides was the premise upon which the Commission was founded. Its purpose was to change Mexico’s decision about admitting braceros to Texas, not to make significant changes in Texas society and economic base. Only two pieces of state legislation during the war specifically addressed the rights of Latin Americans. The first was a non-binding resolution passed by both houses of the state legislature in May, 1943. This too was supposedly an effort to respond to criticism from Mexico. The basis of the resolution was to recognize that “All persons of the Caucasian Race within the jurisdiction of this State are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of all public places of business or amusement.”

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333 El Paso Times, 31 August 1943.


as whites, therefore confirming theoretically that Mexican Americans were truly “white” and not black. As Clinchy pointed out, there was no method for receiving complaints, no means to enforce the policy, and no penalty for violating the good neighbor policy. Not surprisingly, the resolution passed with ease.\textsuperscript{336}

The only other attempt to address discrimination in public facilities was a May, 1945, bill introduced by Senator J. Franklin Spears of San Antonio. The bill would have \textit{required} hotels, cafes, amusement places, swimming pools, and parks to be open on the same basis to all persons of the Caucasian and Indian races. The bill passed in the Senate but died in the Texas House on a vote of 46-63.\textsuperscript{337} It seemed that the legislators were not ready to deal with the state’s longstanding discriminatory practices. Pauline Kibbe, Executive Secretary of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, wrote a sympathetic book in 1946 detailing reported incidents of discrimination and the results of surveys on segregation. She described several major areas that were problematic for Mexican Americans: refusal of service in public places, real estate restrictions, school segregation, and employment barriers.\textsuperscript{338} Clearly, all of these aspects of discrimination were interrelated.

\textbf{Discrimination}

It is generally agreed that discrimination against anyone of Mexican origin was even more

\textsuperscript{336} Texas House Concurrent Resolution No. 105, Forty-eighth Legislature, 15 April 1943.

\textsuperscript{337} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 29 May, 1945.

severe in Texas than elsewhere in the United States during the years under study. Observers tend to agree that El Paso did not practice the extent of segregation and social discrimination common in other parts of the Texas. Nonetheless, in El Paso, as elsewhere, “Mexican” was often a derogatory term that meant anyone of Mexican descent. A more privileged term was either “Spanish American” or “Latin American.” Anglos were also referred to as “Americans, or whites.”339 These appellations were clearly brought out in the local El Paso newspapers at the time. A young boy who performed an heroic act was referred to as Latin American. But youth arrested for various reasons were invariably Mexican. Want ads differentiated between Spanish American (for slightly higher grade jobs) and American, meaning Anglo. Certainly it would seem that lighter skinned Mexicans and those who had middle class origins in Mexico fared better. Class and race gave opportunity or denied it.

U.S. Census figures were unreliable when it came to counting the Mexican-origin population of the time. Nonetheless, by 1940, census figures showed 55,000 Mexican Americans out of a total city population of 97,810. The U.S. Census attempt to get an accurate count of people of Mexican descent began in 1930. In that year, there was a “Mexican” category which asked for those who were “born in Mexico or having parents born in Mexico who were not definitely white, Negro, Indian, or Japanese.” This count disregarded all Mexican-heritage people who were in the United States more than a generation ago, and it premised Mexicans as a separate “race.” Obviously the census figures were misleading and various Mexican American groups protested this change in methodology. In 1940, the U.S. Census tried to get a better handle on the number of Hispanics by counting the number of Spanish-speaking people in the United States. Those figures indicated that there were

339 Anglo meant not of British descent but rather any white non-Hispanic person.
1,861,400 Spanish-speaking people in the United States, and that of that total, 1,570,740 lived in the states of Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, and were presumably of Mexican background. This was almost surely an undercount.

In 1936, El Paso Mexican Americans faced a new definition of their heritage. On October 5, Dr. T.J. McCamant of the El Paso City-County Health Unit announced the decision to start tabulating Mexican Americans (who were then classified as “white”) as “colored” so that the “white” statistics in infant mortality would not look so disastrous in a city that had long proclaimed itself as important to health seekers. Whiteness as a concept had personal and social value, but in pre-World War II America it also had an overwhelmingly political value. While Mexicans experienced de facto segregation across the spectrum of education, housing, work, and politics, Afro-Americans were confined to rigid de jure segregation. Mexicans were leery of any change in classification that would count them as “nonwhite” because of the potential for increased discrimination. Another reason to fight the 1936 reclassification was to be able to vote in the Democratic primary, from which blacks were excluded. In a strongly Democratic state, the winner of the primary was virtually guaranteed success in the general election. A number of local organizations, including LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), the Armijo Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the National Catholic Welfare Conference, joined together to protest any reclassification. El Paso lawyer Frank Galvan was president-general of LULAC at the time. He declared that all LULAC chapters across the Southwest would unite in fighting the proposed change. Within two days, the Sixty-First District Court heard the Mexican American request for an injunction. Dr. 

340 Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 59-60.

341 The 1940 census calculations show that there were 132,164,569 people in the nation. Texas, the sixth largest state, had 6,414,824.
McCamant quickly recanted, announcing that the reclassification would not go into effect.”

Some Mexican Americans believed (or hoped) that class distinctions could counteract discrimination. Fernando Oaxaca, who eventually became part of the Richard Nixon Administration, described himself as growing up in El Paso in a household of good Spanish, with a love of books and learning, of wanting to progress and be something, and driven unmercifully by his parents to get good grades. He depicted the “well-off group of [Mexican] people who escaped from the Revolution and came to El Paso with notions of respect for education, no real feeling of social inadequacy or insecurity. And I and a lot of my contemporaries are the children of that group. So we all grew up with a feeling that, okay, so we were of background; but if we got education, [if] we went to college, we could make it.” Fernando Oaxaca knew that the middle-class children of refugees from the Mexican Revolution had a better chance than children of farm laborers escaping not only the Revolution but dire poverty. And he said that discrimination did not weigh heavily upon him. “From my experience, [the] so-called discrimination in other parts of Texas has been far more benign in the El Paso area, if existing at all. I think that this has always been an international town, [and there has been] a warm acceptance even by the Anglo community of the Mexican culture, of the Spanish heritage, of the language.”

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343 Interview with Fernando Oaxaca by Oscar J. Martinez, 23 October, 1975, No.196, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. Oaxaca was in high school during World War II and served in the army in Europe during the late 1940s.
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)

By the time the United States entered the war, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) had already been in existence for 12 years. LULAC was formed in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas, to combat the virulent discrimination against Mexican Americans.\(^{344}\) The founders of LULAC named themselves Latin Americans as part of their attempt to “develop within the members of our race, the best, purest, and more perfect type of true and loyal citizen of the United States of America.”\(^{345}\) They believed that self education could overcome the sharpest effects of discriminatory practices. The LULAC News of April, 1940, exemplified this passionate belief. An editorial by George Cisneros (the father of Henry Cisneros, who became mayor of San Antonio and cabinet member in the Clinton Administration) cried out:

LULAC! EDUCATION! To me they are synonymous!

It is a joyful satisfaction indeed to know that at last a powerful organization has taken the initiative to furnish aid to deserving young Spanish-Americans in their discouraging attempts for betterment through education. There is no better road to equality than the promotion of education of the individual, for through [that] comes natural result of enlightenment, which means PROGRESS.\(^{346}\)

LULAC quickly spread across Texas and the Southwest. A chapter was formed in El Paso in 1932. LULAC became the largest and most influential Mexican American

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organization into the 1960s. LULAC has often been described as a middle-class group, emphasizing both their cultural origins and the importance of being an American citizen. The 1930s leaders of LULAC believed that only through American citizenship could the organization bring to bear enough clout to combat the effects of discrimination. Historian Mario Garcia believed that as “beneficiaries, to some extent, of the American free enterprise system, many LULAC leaders and members believed in and promoted the qualities of ‘American characters’ that they believed were partly responsible for their success, including individualism, a strong work ethic, and faith in progress.” Garcia identified a composite picture of such models: “American born, rising from poor backgrounds to achieve education, veterans of World War I or World War II, high school or college graduates, and professionally a lawyer, teacher, physician, or government employee. In all, LULAC equated Americanism with middle-class success and believed that true leadership could emanate only from the middle class.”

William Flores exemplified LULAC leaders. According to a 1936 LULAC article, Flores was a descendent of prominent Spanish pioneers who settled in New Mexico, and his father, Don Manuel E. Flores, a gentleman of the old school, was one of the most learned and prominent Latin American residents in the city of El Paso. William Flores enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War I. By 1936, Flores was already in charge of the Medical Department’s civilian personnel at William Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso, one of the largest Army medical centers in the United States. According to the article, “Due to the position he holds he has been instrumental in placing hundreds of Latin Americans in jobs which otherwise would be lost to them.”

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nationals and Mexican Americans, as well as to some scholars, LULAC essentially adopted Anglo conceptions of respectability. David Montejano suggested that the standards that LULAC expected of its membership were “the highest standards of respectability—speak English, dress well, encourage education, and be polite in race relation.” Mario Garcia argues that league members hoped to achieve some “balance between mainstream Anglo-American culture and the culture derived from their Mexican roots.” As Ben Marquez commented, “Because of their privileged yet precarious position, LULAC’s membership had a stake in reforming rather than remaking American society. As a consequence they would be found proclaiming loyalty to the United States and its government even at a time when racism against Mexican Americans was rampant.”

LULAC leaders traveled around Texas in groups called “Flying Squadrons” to promote the organization and begin new chapters. Willy Flores describes how LULAC in El Paso fought discrimination: A LULAC committee would go to the local politicians about problems like discriminatory practices in the public schools. They reinforced their message by saying, “We can prove our charges. We’ll go to the papers with this charge here if you won’t listen to us. But I know that you can correct it.” And according to Flores, “they promised to correct it and they did so; and we were satisfied.”

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350 Reminiscent of the Escadrones volantes that were part of the Spanish colonial administration in Mexico.

351 Richard Garcia, Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class, 272-273.

352 Interview with William Flores by Oscar J. Martinez, 26 November and 4 December 1979, No. 333, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
were made, but certainly it was not likely that politicians in other parts of Texas would be so amenable to corrections.

However, polite pressure didn’t always work. When several leaders protested to Sheriff Chris Fox about his hiring of deputies he characteristically replied: “I think I know what you fellows want. You know why I don’t have more Spanish-speaking deputies here on my force? Well, let me tell you the truth. I select people who vote for me. If a hundred people voted, and 90 percent of those people are of one racial extraction, and 10 of them of another racial extraction, [and if] I’ve got places for 10 employees, I’ll give you one. That’s the way I put my employees to work. It may not be truly representative of the population as a whole, but if that population wants more representation, they’d better get out and vote.”

By the eve of World War II there were over 80 LULAC councils in several states. Without rejecting Mexican heritage, LULAC during its first decade leaned away from that heritage and toward Anglo middle-class values as a prerequisite to joining the American mainstream. The LULAC emphasis on speaking English and being a good American citizen were tied in to the wartime values of patriotism. And they did seek redress against discrimination through the courts. As J.C. Machuca wrote in his brief history of LULAC in El Paso County, “We have made notable progress in education, in our economic situation and in our cultural attainments. All this has been accomplished not through boycotts, sit-downs, sit-ins, marches and least of all violence. Whenever and wherever our civil rights have been placed in jeopardy or violated LULAC has resorted to the courts of law as is provided in the Constitution of the LULAC organization. [Emphasis in the original]“
Yet there was always the pressure, both individual and group, to prove themselves equal to the dominant society. Part of the minutes of Council No. 132 in 1943 included a comment from Machuca. He told the council that he had been missing meetings since he was obliged to study for exams at his place of work. “Without the wish to take any glory he stated that in the final examination he obtained a total of 88% in points, next man was a gentleman by the name of Valdes with a total of about 80%; and next another citizen with a latin (sic) name; which shows that citizens of Latin extraction can and will keep on par or better than citizens of other extractions.” Later in the same year, Machuca expressed his “great joy” at the increase in Latin Americans employed at the Federal Correctional Institute at La Tuna, near El Paso. He believed that it showed the ability of Mexican Americans to distinguished themselves on a par with Anglos.355 While LULAC councils in El Paso were on the alert for discriminatory action, they also could be quick to criticize themselves. Modesto Gomez, LULAC national president in 1943, “in a very pleasant and interesting talk brought up the matter of our weaknesses, we do not easily forgive and are too thin skined [sic] in just criticism made of us.”356 In effect, Gomez’s remarks reflected the treatment even middle-class Mexican Americans encountered from Anglos.

As the war continued, El Paso LULAC Councils remained aware of evidence of discrimination and for correcting omissions. For example, in October 1943, Council 132 complained to the principal of Bowie High School (the “Mexican” high school located in the segundo barrio) that the largest department store in town, The Popular, had a window display listing all the boys who attended the two other high schools in El Paso and who were now

355 Minutes of LULAC Council 132, September 15, 1943. William Flores file, Box 3, Folder 20. Benson Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

356 William Flores files, Box 3, Folder 13, LULAC Council No. 8, 21 February 1941. Benson Collection, University of Texas at Austin.
serving in the armed forces. Unaccountably, Bowie had been left out. LULAC supported
setting up a memorial at the high school to recognize Bowie students who served in the war.
On behalf of Bowie they asked that a nearby hide factory with noxious smells be condemned by
the City. Council 132 also formed a committee on delinquency and offered to work with the
Superintendent of El Paso schools and the Chamber of Commerce.357 The El Paso chapter,
like most others, lost members for the duration. Even with limited membership, they did not give
up on their emphasis on education, political activity, and combating discrimination

**Discrimination in Public Accommodations**

Almost immediately, the Good Neighbor Commission reported dozens of examples of
discrimination throughout the state. Kibbe described the 117 complaints of restrictions
received during only the first four months of the Commission’s existence in 1943. Of these
complaints from individuals, Latin American organizations, and Mexican consuls, 110 were
about refusal of service in public places. Only two of these complaints came from the border
region.358 In areas of West and South Texas away from the border, many restaurants, cafes,
and hotels would not serve potential customers who looked Mexican. Apparently, this was
uncommon in El Paso. At the beginning of the war, El Paso’s Hispanics were a slight majority in
the overall population. The sheer numbers of Mexicans meant that businesses would likely be
reluctant to turn away non-Anglo clients.

Interviews from the University of Texas at El Paso Oral History Institute tell the same

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357 William Flores files, Box 3, Folder 20, LULAC Council 132, 6 October 1943; 15 March 1944; 21 September
1945, Benson Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

story over and over: Service was rarely refused in El Paso, but exclusion was a common occurrence in other parts of Texas. Gloria Asprion describes her days at Austin High School from 1936 to 1940. On one occasion, she recalls that the Mexican American football players on the school team were not allowed to go into restaurants or hotels in Odessa, Texas. According to Asprion, “East Texas was even worse.” Arnando Sanchez agreed that no one discriminated against him in El Paso; his only negative experience was in East Texas.359 Roberto Gomez expressed himself in mixed English and Spanish. “En Houston hay mucho discriminación contra el Chicano y el Negro. Lo mismo en Dallas, en San Antonio es lo mismo – todos esos towns. Si esos towns se le arrimaran a El Paso en un poco, estuvieran mas mejor.” J.C. Machuca saw signs elsewhere in the state proclaiming: Dogs and Mexicans Not Allowed, but he said they did not exist in El Paso.360

Despite these positive memories of relative openness in restaurants or movie theaters, even in El Paso not all Mexican Americans were welcome. Moreover, real estate restrictions, school segregation, and limited employment opportunities remained mostly unchanged in El Paso. Mario Acevedo remembered two occasions when he was refused service in a restaurant – once in Laredo and the other time in El Paso “en un restaurant que se llama Texas Café, en la Calle Texas. Me acuerdo muy bien del año: 1937.”361 It was common in many Texas communities to deny entry to Hispanics in parks and at public swimming pools, or to establish particular times

359 Gloria Asprion, interview by author, 10 March 2000; interview with Armando Sanchez by Rosa Mirales, 30 November 1976, No. 270, Institute of Oral History.

360 “In Houston, there’s a lot of discrimination against the Chicano and the Negro. The same thing in Dallas, in San Antonio it’s the same – all those towns. If those towns were a little more like El Paso, it would be much better.” Interview with Roberto Gomez by Raymundo Gomez, 28 November 1976, No. 236; Interview with J.C. Machuca by Oscar J. Martinez, 9 May 1975, No. 152, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

361 “In a restaurant called Texas Café, on Texas Street, I remember the year very well: 1937.” Interview with Mario Acevedo by Oscar J. Martinez, 1 May 1975, No. 153.2, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
and days that Hispanics were allowed. According to Roberto Gomez, these restrictions also happened in El Paso. “Ibanos a banarnos al swimming pool y lo’o no nos dejaban entrar.”

Roberto said that Memorial Park Swimming Pool was for the “gabachos” [foreigners, or Anglos], while Washington Park was reserved for Chicanos. At Memorial Park, it wasn’t a hard and fast rule; sometimes Chicanas got in (that is, the girls might be allowed to enter but not the boys), or Hispanics could get in on certain days.

Movies were another area of potential segregation. Some interviewees claimed they never experienced any segregation at movie houses. J. C. Machuca remembered a time when “the Mexican Americans had to sit in the balcony; they couldn’t go to the main floor. But that gradually died away.” Still, he had to insist on his right to sit downstairs: “Sometimes they said, ‘Do you want to buy a balcony ticket?’ ‘No, I’m paying for a main floor ticket.’ Something like that. They wouldn’t challenge that. When I made my wants definite, they [would comply].”

When Roberto Gomez went to the movies, it was more difficult. If he and

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362 “We went to go swimming at the swimming pool, and then they wouldn’t let us in.” Interview with Roberto Gomez by Raymundo Gomez, 28 November 1976, No. 263, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

363 Interview with J.C. Machuca by Oscar J Martinez, 9 May 1975, No. 152, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

364 “The only way that we went to the Pershing Theatre was to get together, we had t9 get 15 r 20 if us together.” Interview with Roberto Gomez by Raymundo Gomez, 28 November 1976, No. 263, Institute of Oral History.


his buddies wanted to go to the movies in an Anglo neighborhood they had to go in force. “El único modo que ibanos como al Pershing Theatre era, nos juntabanos, nos tenianos que juntar como de 15, 20 camaradas.”

Real Estate Restrictions

Discrimination and segregation in housing patterns were common in El Paso at the beginning of the war. When Roberto Gomez left his Southside neighborhood to go north he entered a world that was almost completely Anglo. His neighborhood ran parallel to the railroad tracks that divided El Paso and was three blocks north of the tracks. Other Hispanics thought of Yandell Boulevard as a dividing line. Reyes Torres said Mexican Americans didn’t venture north of Yandell or they would have been arrested or beaten up. After the war, he decided he would go anywhere, live anywhere he wanted. He demanded equal treatment and even bought a house north of Yandell. Anglos may not have been as conscious of a dividing line. Certainly Ann Goodman does not remember it that way as she grew up on Yandell Boulevard.

But there was a distinction, a dividing line that certainly every Mexican American El Pasoan was aware of. South El Paso below the railroad tracks was almost completely Hispanic;

367 City Directory, El Paso, TX, 1940.

366 Interviews with Fernando Oaxaca, No. 196 and Roberto Gomez, No. 263, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
from Yandell Boulevard north was a very different story. Immediately above Yandell was Montana Street, then Rio Grande Street, and Arizona Street. Yandell’s resident population was 16.6 percent Spanish surnamed; Montana’s Spanish surname population dropped abruptly to 6.5 percent. Then the percentage rose somewhat on Rio Grande and Arizona streets to 12.0 percent and 11.9 percent respectively.367 Thus El Paso, unlike many Texas towns and cities, had some Spanish-surnamed people living in predominantly Anglo neighborhoods. Some may have been located there as service people, like seamstresses or cooks, but others lived the middle-class life in single family homes. Fernando Oaxaca, who eventually became a successful businessman, grew up in a largely Anglo neighborhood, one where he felt comfortable and accepted. Yet, as he pointed out, “I’m not very dark skinned, and I am told that I always spoke perfect English.” That was very unlike the situation for Roberto Gomez, who was afraid to venture into an Anglo neighborhood alone. Gomez was small, weighing only 118 pounds, and dark-skinned (“They would tell me, ‘He’s nothing but a Mexican nigger’”), clearly not an Anglo and therefore did not belong in an Anglo neighborhood.368

El Paso’s housing segregation may have been more economic and class-oriented than purely anti-Mexican, but it was almost as effective as actual redlining (i.e., refusing to sell or rent to Hispanics in certain neighborhoods). David Montejano describes segregation all across Texas: “Although Anglo businessmen, from realtors to bathing house proprietors, followed a general practice of not doing business with Mexicans, they were often willing, especially if pressured to accept the ‘Castilian’ or ‘cleaner type’ of Mexican as a customer.”369

Below the railroad tracks lay South El Paso. This area was almost exclusively Hispanic and poor. South El Paso was also called the Second Ward or the Segundo Barrio. By the mid 1930s it comprised 20 percent of El Paso’s population, but far more than 20 percent of El Paso’s needs. In 1934, the El Paso City Council successfully requested federal funds to conduct a survey of South Side. Walter Stockwell incorporated the results of this survey in his 1937 application for federal housing.

The present housing in substandard districts consists mostly of two room apartments without private toilet or bathing facilities, and without sinks or water supply inside the apartment. The only heat is from the cook stove and large families use these apartments. The survey shows 2.5 rooms per family, and an average family of 4.3 persons. Or 1.7 persons per room. Some buildings have as many as seven persons per room.  

Stockwell estimated that 10,000 families were estimated to be living in “indecent, unsafe, and unsanitary housing.” These conditions were certainly the result of the economic pressures on Mexican American families and the neglect of the power structure to improve the housing and health circumstances in South El Paso. But conditions were exacerbated by the constant influx of new impoverished immigrants.

The Anglo view of Southside El Paso varied significantly. In El Paso: A History and Guide, published in 1942 by the Writer’s Program of the Works Progress Administration, the writers waxed lyrical about South El Paso:

“Even in the poorer sections where poverty forces humble living conditions, there is little of the squalor often found in such localities; crowded tenements are bright with flowering potted plants, and the old walls of adobe houses are softened by the beauty of exotic vines. Life in Chihuahuita (South El Paso) proceeds much as it does south of the Rio

Grande. Horse-driven wagons and pushcarts, some of the vehicles with wooden wheels and others boasting old automobile wheels, are used by the more affluent peddlers. Clusters of families live in adobe tenements, using community water hydrants and limited sanitary facilities. But invariably there are semitropical flowers, either in tiny front yards or in tin cans or buckets.”

Another wartime guide had a distinctly different view of South El Paso. In describing the Alamito and Tays housing projects, the *Servicemen’s Recreational Guide to the El Paso Area* observed that these projects “have done much to alleviate the crowded, unsanitary conditions once prevalent in this section of El Paso. Here in squalor lived many of the city’s poor. Families averaging from five to a dozen people existed in dark, two and three room buildings. Many of the houses had dirt floors, all lacked proper ventilation and lighting, and sanitary facilities were so inadequate as to at times create a health menace. Backyards were littered with garbage.”

Presumably these are the same houses that had charming flowers decorating the yards.

A survey of South El Paso in 1948 showed still appalling conditions. Aside from the Alamito and the Tays Housing project, little had changed. There was no political will to make better housing, and middle-class Mexican American organizations like LULAC concentrated on discrimination in schools and not on living conditions. In 1948, the population of South El Paso was 23,000 people, one-fifth of the entire population of the city, nearly all living in substandard housing. The number of families possessing a private toilet was only 3 percent, those with a shower, 5 percent, and the families with a bathtub were 3 percent. The average

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number of families per toilet was 7.06; the average number of persons per toilet was 71. The Census of Housing: 1950 showed a continuing problem with poor housing that affected nearly half the homes in El Paso. More than 15,000 houses needed major repairs; most of these had no private bath and/or lacked running water. Even several years after the war was over, there was not evidence of positive change for as many as half of El Paso habitations. Thus the war failed to alter prevailing housing conditions in El Paso.

**Segregation and Discrimination in Education**

In Texas, Mexican Americans were classified as “white” in the World War II era. In theory, Hispanics were not formally segregated, while the line drawn between whites and blacks was rigidly upheld. In El Paso, Douglas School was the “colored” school, and included first through twelfth grade. In the school year of 1941-1942, there were 338 students, less than 2 percent of the El Paso student population. Across Texas schools were largely segregated for Mexican Americans by local custom, especially in the earlier grades. Often high schools remained open to Hispanics, mostly because the school districts were well aware that the majority of Mexican American children would drop out by sixth grade. In El Paso, the 1941-1942 total school population was 20,450. The school census (all children between 6 and 17 years old in the city) totaled 26,289. What this meant was that there were over 26,000 children

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373 A Short History of South El Paso, 30.


eligible to enroll in public school, but only 20,450 were actually enrolled.\textsuperscript{376} Texas had an insidious arrangement that encouraged school districts not to look too closely at the children who didn’t show up for school. Every school district in the state received money based in enrollment eligibility, not the number of children who actually attended. Thus, school districts were better off financially if they did not encourage full enrollment.

Nonetheless, El Paso had 16,813 students from “Spanish-speaking homes,” a figure that the \textit{El Paso Times} called “out of all proportion to the percentage of Spanish-speaking people in the city’s population.”\textsuperscript{377} Presumably, the conservative \textit{Times} was uncomfortable with the statistics that emphasized the growing numbers of Hispanics in El Paso. In fact, the school census figures make eminent sense. The estimated number of Hispanic children was 64 percent of the total school age population. Census Bureau figures for 1940 show 55,000 Mexican Americans out of a total population of 97,810, or 56 percent. Since Hispanic families tended to have more children than Anglos, this makes the 64 percent school census statistic a reasonable figure.

Although there was no de jure segregation of Mexican Americans in El Paso’s schools, the de facto segregation was alive and well. The El Paso School District was divided into four districts: North Side, East Side, South Side, and Alameda. Most of the children of Mexican parentage lived in the South Side and Alameda districts; in 1941-42, the elementary school population of those two districts (assumed to be nearly all Hispanic) was 7,741, or 57 percent of the total. The South Side elementary schools were Franklin, Aoy, Alamo, San Jacinto, and Bowie Elementary. Alameda District schools were Beall, Lincoln, Zavala, and Burleson.


\textsuperscript{377} \textit{El Paso Times}, 16 November, 1941.
Bowie High School was the “Mexican” high school. The school census for these schools was overwhelmingly Hispanic. Ruben Salcido, who went to Beall School, remembered only “one gringito [little Anglo child].”  According to A. O. Wynn, three other elementary schools “which were on the dividing line between the north and south portion of the city, have members which are approximately half Anglo and half Latin-American.” Gloria Asprion, a Mexican American who went to Alta Vista, a “dividing line” school, remembers that when there were two classes in a grade they were usually separated, one Anglo, one Mexican.

The majority-Hispanic elementary schools tended to be very big and very crowded. As Manuel Ramirez has observed, “El Paso neglected the schools on the south side. The school system deliberately maintained inferior education facilities for Mexican students. Overcrowded schools were a common feature in the barrio.” For instance, in 1941-42 the three largest elementary schools, Aoy, Beall and Alamo, had 1,601, 1,343, and 1,065 pupils respectively. Some were on double shift. The “Anglo” schools tended to be much smaller, with the largest, Morehead, having only 824 students. No matter where the children went to school, they were almost certain to have an Anglo teacher. At the beginning of the war, there were 603 teachers in the El Paso public schools; only 17 were Mexican Americans. By the end of the war, in the 1945-46 school year, one more Mexican American teacher had been added, to make


18. This meant that only 3 percent of teachers in the district were Hispanic while at least 64 percent of the students were Hispanic.  

Some Anglos public officials refused to see the discriminatory patterns or the prejudice behind it. Chris Fox was sheriff of El Paso from 1934 to 1942 and thereafter was manager of the Chamber of Commerce from 1942 to 1950. When queried about the fact that Mexican Americans comprised a very small percentage of teachers and that there were never more than two representatives on the school board, Chris Fox huffed, “Well, what difference does it make whether there’s two out of seven or six out of seven. I mean, is the school getting along?” Fox went on to add, “So you see, having lived a part of it all my life and knowing them [Mexican Americans] intimately, and they me, all this crap (if you’ll pardon the expression) just doesn’t register with me.”

To follow the sample year of 1941-42, although there were 13,571 elementary school children, there were only 5,338 in high school classes, plus 1,494 in courses called “Adult Homemaking.” The academic high schools – Austin, Bowie and El Paso High – counted for only 3,844 students. Bowie was nearly all Hispanic, while at Austin and El Paso High Anglos were a large majority, but not exclusively so. The lines were not so rigidly drawn as in many other Texas communities. Nonetheless, the majority of Mexican American students who went on to high school went to Bowie High School. And from there, there was little likelihood that they would go to college.

In 1948, the El Paso Public Schools and the El Paso branch of the American Association

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of University Women joined together to conduct a “Survey of the Opinions of Students Graduated from the High Schools of El Paso, 1936-1946.” The respondents turned out to be roughly equal from the three high schools. Of the 217 respondents from Austin, Bowie, and El Paso high schools who went to college, only 14 of them were from Bowie. Of the 131 who earned a college degree, only one was from Bowie. Most college-bound students of any background went on to the local college, then called the College of Mines and Metallurgy. In 1949, it would be designated Texas Western College and eventually the University of Texas at El Paso. The entire student body in 1940 numbered 1,223, of whom 145 had Spanish surnames, or 11.9 percent. By law, there were no blacks at all, and they would not be admitted until 1955. The graduates of May and August, 1940, totaled 121, of whom 14.9 percent were Hispanic. Among them, a few were from Mexico, but most were Mexican Americans from El Paso. By the end of the war, the percentage of Hispanic students at the College of Mines had risen slightly to 13.8 percent, but the percentage of Mexican American graduates in 1944 had dropped to 5.9 percent. Throughout the war years, there were no administrative officers, professors, or instructors who were Hispanic.

**Employment**

Few wartime Hispanics in El Paso earned the kind of living that could support a

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middle class lifestyle. Crowded, largely segregated schools were one impediment to getting a good job, but just one of several factors. Oscar Martinez described some of the structural discriminatory barriers that kept Mexican Americans at the bottom of the employment heap. That included the constant in-migration from Mexico plus the competition from neighboring Ciudad Juarez, the wage differentials for Hispanics and Anglos, and job exclusion. In Martinez’s research on the occupational distribution of the “El Paso Labor Forces, by Surname, 1910-1970,” he noted that in 1940 high white collar jobs were held by a minuscule 1.8 percent of people with Spanish surnames, while over two-thirds of Hispanics held jobs that were categorized as unskilled labor, menial service work, semi-skilled and service work.  

Much of the economy of El Paso was built upon the use of cheap labor, and few Hispanics could aspire to solidly middle class jobs. Carlos Castañeda, historian and Regional Director of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, vehemently observed the Catch 22: A labor system that kept Mexican Americans at the bottom of the ladder only reinforced negative Anglo perceptions of Mexicans as lazy, dirty, or simply less able, which was in turn used as an excuse to exclude them from better paying jobs. As El Pasoan Mario Acevedo put it, “la generalidad de nosostros pudieramos aspirar eran estas: dependiente de tiendas de ropa o de abarrotes, choferes, elevatoristas, trabajadores de ‘maintenance’, o a lo mas, trabajadores de oficina.” At the very bottom of the wage scale were agricultural workers. The pressure of workers from Mexico kept farm workers at a less-than-living wage.

Although Mexico refused to allow braceros to be contracted in Texas until 1947, Texas

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389 “Most of us could only aspire to be clerks in a clothing or grocery store, drivers, elevator operators, maintenance workers or, at best, office workers.” Interview with Mario Acevedo by Oscar J. Martinez, 1 May 1975, No. 153-1, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
growers simply took advantage of illegal workers. They paid them a minimal amount of money. For instance, the prevailing wage that braceros had to be paid during the war years was 30 cents an hour. Texas growers managed to pay less to their illegal workers. As Carlos Castañeda put it, “The wages paid to Mexican-Americans and the opportunities offered for employment are, in the final analysis, plain and simple exploitation.” In the El Paso area, cotton growers, in particular, were anxious for a continuation of cheap Mexican labor. Then Chamber of Commerce manager Chris P. Fox expressed perplexity over the lack of available farm labor in October, 1942. He suggested that “if there is such a terrific shortage of cotton pickers in this area—and there is—these 2,000 farm hands in Juarez would like to know why they can’t come over and relieve the situation. I am unable to give them anything like a reasonable answer to any of their questions.” This disingenuous claim omitted completely the refusal of the Mexican government to allow braceros or any other Mexican agricultural laborer to work in Texas.

In addition to receiving abysmally low wages at the bottom of the labor scale, Hispanics faced wage differentials across the spectrum of jobs. From waiting on tables to working as a mining engineer, Hispanics could expect less. For instance, Martin Armagnac graduated from the College of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso and worked for American and British mining companies in northern Mexico. There was a clear distinction between Anglo and Mexican engineers: “The Anglos had better quarters, a clubhouse, a library and a swimming pool while on

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392 *El Paso Times*, 21 October, 1942.
the other side, the tennis court was the only recreation.“\textsuperscript{393}

Hispanics could expect to be paid less than Anglos for similar work. Community leader and local historian Cleofas Calleros asked, “What was the use of a Mexican going to high school when he couldn’t get a decent job?” Calleros gave the example of a local Hispanic girl graduated from high school who went to work for a local dimes store for $15 a week. Even though she had the added advantage of being bilingual, her Anglo counterpart at the same counter would be placed in charge and earn $20 or $25 a week.”\textsuperscript{394} Labor organizer Humberto Silex described the job structure at American Smelting and Refining Company: entry-level helpers earned two or three cents more than labor; the assistant got a dollar more. Only the stoker earned a skilled worker’s wage. “Resulta que un hispano podia morirse alli de ayudante, pero nunca lo ascendian a asistente, a que ganara el dolar mas. Pero un anglo entraban de asistente sin saber nada y el ayudante tenfa que enseñarle el trabajo de asistente y cuidarlo.”\textsuperscript{395}

In addition to differences in pay, there were many areas where Hispanics simply couldn’t get a job. University of Texas at El Paso professor William Rivera remembered his sister’s job hunting in the World War II era: “She applied at the telephone company, and Mexicans didn’t get jobs in the telephone company. She applied at Standard Oil, and Mexicans didn’t get jobs at Standard Oil. At the gas company I had a good friend who was a big wheel that ended up being a vice president….I used to deliver his papers. He got me a job and I thanked him for it. I

\textsuperscript{393} Martin Armagnac interview by author.

\textsuperscript{394} Interview with Cleofas Calleros by Oscar J. Martinez, 14 September 1972, No. 157, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

\textsuperscript{395} “What happens is that an Hispanic could die remaining a helper; they would never raise him to an assistant, one who earned a dollar more. But an Anglo came in as an assistant without knowing anything, and the helper had to teach him the assistant’s work and look after him.” Humberto Silex, interview by Oscar J. Martinez and Art Sadin, 28 April 1978, No. 505, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
don’t mean it badly; but even there, where I had a friend, the jobs that I would get were as a yardman in their pumping stations, or out on the pipeline. You didn’t get an office job or a clean job.”

Mike Romo echoed the problems in getting any “clean” job. “If the stores like the Popular, Hyman Krupp, and the Elite Confectionary employed any Mexican people, it was only for janitor services or dishwashers. The Popular was the first one to begin to employ Mexican people. Mr. Schwartz [President of the Popular Dry Goods Store] was partial to the Mexican people; he liked them. So he began to tell the other bosses that ‘We should employ these people.’ It paid off, because they began to get a lot of trade from Juárez afterwards.”

Although there were some new opportunities for El Paso Mexican Americans during World War II, especially at Fort Bliss, the greater changes took place in the postwar era would not go into effect.

The Poll Tax and Voters

In addition to discrimination in public accommodation, housing, education, and employment, there was also subtle discrimination in the act of voting, especially through the poll tax. Texas, like most Southern states, required an annual payment of a fee for voting. Ostensibly, the poll tax was to cover the cost of elections. Its more immediate goal was to restrict access to the ballet box. Poll taxes in Texas during the 1940s cost $1.75, a not inconsiderable sum at a time when a maid might earn $5.00 a week and laborers 40 cents an hour. Furthermore, the poll taxes had to be paid months in advance of primary and general

396 Interview with William Rivera by Oscar J. Martinez, 15 September, 1976, No. 322, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

397 Interview with Mike Romo by Oscar J. Martinez, 8 and 14 October 1978, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

elections. Poll taxes were a constant concern of LULAC. The group placed great emphasis on voting as the right and duty of LULAC members “so that we may secure our rightful place in the Sun.”\textsuperscript{399} LULAC members were well aware that limited voting by Mexican Americans challenged their ability to be successful politically. Potential jury members were culled from voter lists, adding another layer of discrimination. A LULAC Council discussion in December 1943 pointed out that the Grand Jury for the County of El Paso “had only one Colored man and one American of Latin extraction” on the jury. According to the minutes, “until such time as the Americans of Latin extraction gave more attention to the needs of obtaining Poll Taxes, this condition [low representation on juries] would continue.”\textsuperscript{400} LULAC members were expected to pay their poll taxes, and according to minutes throughout the war years they usually achieved 100 percent participation. Yet, paying poll taxes clearly was not enough to ensure what the LULAC constitution aimed for--full equality in the American polity. To ask mostly poor people to pay each year the current-day equivalent of $21 for the privilege of voting was not realistic. Full equality would have meant abolishing the poll taxes, and that did not happen in Texas until 1966.\textsuperscript{401} Roosevelt and liberal Congressional Democrats tried it eliminate poll taxes in 1943, but the bill did not pass. A 1943 letter to the \textit{Arizona Daily Star} in Tucson illustrates the impact of the poll tax. In 1940 only 22 percent of the potential electorate voted in the poll-tax states (all Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina,

\begin{footnotesize}
\bibitem{399}
William Flores files, Box 3, Folder 13, LULAC Council No. 8, 21 February 1941, Benson Collection University of Texas at Austin.

\bibitem{400}
William Flores files, Box 3, Folder 20, LULAC Council No. 132, 29 December 1943, Benson Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

\bibitem{401}
In 1964, the 24\textsuperscript{th} Amendment of the Constitution abolished the use of the poll tax. But it took a 1966 Supreme Court ruling to finally abolish the poll tax in Texas.
\end{footnotesize}
Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) as compared with 71 percent in the rest of the country.\textsuperscript{402} In the 1948 Presidential election none of the poll-tax states listed more than 29 percent of voters participating.\textsuperscript{403}

**Conflict and Violence, the Zoot Suiters**

The strains of war may have brought a new sense of unity in the country, but it could equally be said that racial and ethnic tensions heightened as well. While war brought some opportunity for Mexican Americans, it also brought exacerbated reactions. The so-called June 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles were a major event that caught the attention of most of the country. Certainly in El Paso both daily newspapers were suddenly full of discussion about zoot suiters. Zoot suiters were by no means only Mexican American, nor even confined to minorities. Nonetheless, most seemed to be “located in the socio-economic spheres which constituted the relief clientele and unemployed groups before the war.”\textsuperscript{404}

Mexican American zoot suiters have been described as second generation adolescents who turned away from the traditionalism of their parents but knew that they were not fully accepted in American society. The zoot suit helped create an identity that included Mexican traditions and recognized the racist American culture that rejected Mexicans. As Carey McWilliams noted, the zoot suit could be both a badge of defiance by the rejected against the outside world and, at

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\textsuperscript{402} Arizona Daily Star, 6 June 1943.
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the same time, a symbol of belonging within the inner group.⁴⁰⁵  The suit itself consisted of a broad shouldered long jacket, slacks with a 30-inch knee and a 15-inch bottom.⁴⁰⁶  They wore big double-soled shoes and a hat with a feather in it.

Male zoot suiters were also called “pachucos.” Although the origin of the word has been debated, the most common explanation is that pachuco comes from the caló (Spanish border language) word for El Paso, El Chuco. But in January, 1943, the Herald Post sententiously explained that pachuco was from the word “pachucho.” slang for bum, no-account, shiftless and lazy, also petty thief--thereby managing to incorporate into one spurious definition a host of negatives about pachucos.⁴⁰⁷  On the distaff side, pachucas wore a much simpler outfit—short skirt and sweater, and sometimes piled-up hair, called a pompadour, that, it was claimed, could be used to hide drugs or a weapon. Marta Cotera remembers that pachucas in El Paso were “an awesome element during the war. They protected other women and children. My mother would always take a streetcar with pachucas because it was safer. Nobody messed with them—nobody.”

In Los Angeles as in El Paso, the zoot suit was more often connected with Mexican Americans than other minorities. The Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots took place during June 4 to June 7, 1943. In both cities, the zoot suit wearer was considered a juvenile delinquent, a gang member, a slacker, a hoodlum, a threat to polite society. Zoot suiters were young. According to an El Paso tailor who made zoot suits, the sales were almost always to young men—“no one

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⁴⁰⁵ Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico, 219.


older than eighteen or nineteen ever bought a zoot suit,” he claimed.\textsuperscript{408} In Los Angeles, rumors and reports of zoot suiters attacking Navy servicemen circulated in May of 1943. On the night of June 4, hundreds of sailors roamed the streets of downtown and East Los Angeles beating up young zoot suiters. Although the Los Angeles press claimed that the provocation came from the zoot suiters, there seems to be no clear evidence that that was the case. Police officers did not intervene, giving a clear field of violence to the sailors. The military did not declare the affected area of Los Angeles out of bounds until the night of June 7. So for four nights Navy and other servicemen were free to roam the streets attacking zoot suiters and Mexican American youth in general. Fortunately, no one was killed, but hundreds of Mexican boys were arrested.\textsuperscript{409}

The Los Angeles riots set off a series of worried headlines in the two El Paso English language newspapers. Headlines included “Zoot-Suit Hoodlums Still Prowl Streets at Night.” “Zoot-Suiters Try to Kill Policeman Near Los Angeles” “Mayor Orders Police to Clean Up El Paso Zoot Suit Hoodlums” and “Pacific Area Hoodlums Like Those of Border.”\textsuperscript{410} Like the Los Angeles press, the El Paso papers implied that zoot suit “hoodlums” were responsible for the riots. The Mayor of El Paso responded to the Los Angeles zoot-suit riots by directing the police chief to “clean up any such gangs we have in El Paso.” He characterized the so-called gang members as unemployed vagrants. “Any member of an El Paso zoot suit gang who thinks he is tough will be welcome in the City Jail.” Mayor Anderson added, “We still have a chain gang

\textsuperscript{408} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 15 June, 1943.

\textsuperscript{409} El Paso newspapers closely followed the so-called Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, but there was nothing comparable in El Paso. Yet, only a few days later on June 14, 1943, a downtown “riot” with blacks ended with two deaths--one black man and one white man.

\textsuperscript{410} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 8 June, 9 June, 10 June, 27 July, 1943.
with several vacancies.”

Law enforcement could resort to many tactics to run a city in 1943. More than just threatening incarceration and chain gangs, police had all manner of reasons to arrest young men. They could arrest a youth on “suspicion of assault” (that is, that they might plan to assault someone), “loitering,” or “vagrancy.” The El Paso County Attorney filed complaints against juveniles, charging them with “habitually wandering about the streets in the night-time without being on any business or occupation, and knowingly associating with vicious and immoral persons.” Naturally the burden of proof for these accusations was not on the County Attorney. Later in the year, 12 young men were fined for “loitering in a poolroom.” Apparently loitering could take place indoors as well as out. The powers that be were worried that zoot suiters were carrying “every conceivable type of weapon, guns, knives, blackjacks, sharpened beer can openers, screw drivers, tire irons, and lengths of bicycle chain.” A gang leader at the time described the weapons they carried: “A lot of friends had chains, some of them had a knife. But actually, you didn’t use your knife as often as they do now.” Young Mexican Americans continued to be arrested for “vagrancy,” but there was no Los-Angles-style upheaval.

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411 Ibid., 10 June 1943.


413 Ibid., 10 November, 1943.

414 Ibid., 21 January, 1943

415 South El Pasoan, interview by Wendy S. Thompson, 8 April, 1978, No. 724, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.
Conclusion

In examining major areas of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the World War II era--refusal of service in public places, real estate restrictions, school segregation and employment barriers -- El Paso seems indeed to have been more “flexible and pragmatic” than most parts of Texas.\footnote{David Montejano thought that the border cities (El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville) during this era had ethnic relations that were “flexible and pragmatic, that is, more a matter of class than of ‘race.’” David Montejano, “The Demise of ‘Jim Crow’ for Texas Mexicans, 1940-1970,” \textit{Atzlan} 16, nos. 1-2 (1985):32.} Most interviewees did not remember major problems in being served in restaurants and hotels or being refused entrance to pools and parks or theatres in El Paso. Uniformly, they contrasted El Paso’s openness to the rest of Texas. Nonetheless, people who looked “Mexican” were sometimes pushed out of parks, denied entrance to a public swimming pool, were told, “You get back south of the tracks where the Mexicans are.”\footnote{J.R. Provencio in Barthy Byrd, Legacy: the Impact of World War I: the radio series; interviews with Roberto Gomez, No. 263, and Humberto Silex, No. 505, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.} The real estate segregation seemed more economic and class-based rather than totally exclusionary. Nonetheless, the poorest area of El Paso was totally Hispanic, and the more comfortable areas of town seldom had more than 15 percent Hispanics. School segregation followed the same pattern. Schools “below the tracks” were almost exclusively Mexican American; Hispanics did go to elementary schools “on the dividing line between school districts” and to the “Anglo” high schools, but they were a small percentage. At the local college, the College of Mines, the percentage of Hispanics never surpassed 14 percent during the war years. But the percentage of Mexican American students at the College of Mines was far higher than at the flagship university of the state, the University of Texas at Austin. Even at the end of the war, in 1946, the university in Austin had only 1.6 percent Mexican American students.

The Southside still had appalling living conditions. Two national publications took note of
the condition of El Paso slums. The Nation in July, 1948, used the local 1948 survey of South El Paso to describe how Southside families lived—with as many as ten families using a single toilet—a breeding ground for a high incidence of disease and death rates. In February, 1950, the Saturday Evening Post placed the blame on slumlords and public officials who permitted such conditions to continue. The City largely ignored its housing code in slum areas. Patricia Reschenthaler noted that between 1940 and 1950, “substandard housing conditions, along with a general housing shortage, created one of the most serious socio-economic problems of the period.”

Perhaps the most intractable dividing line was in employment. Few Hispanics were professionals, had successfully negotiated to middle class status, or had political clout. Manuel Ramirez points out, “From 1900 to 1945, no Mexicans served as a member of the El Paso City Council.” As Oscar Martinez discovered, while 67.2 percent of El Paso Hispanics were unskilled or semi-skilled laborers or service workers in 1940, only 12.6 percent were skilled laborers and 18.4 percent were lower white collar workers. Less than 2 percent could be classified as upper white collar workers (even while 14 percent of the College of Mines students were Hispanic). Martinez observed that historically, very few Mexican Americans in El Paso have been able to achieve good positions. He cited few Mexican Americans who achieved success in politics, local government, banks, law firms, as doctors or other professionals. “It’s an enigma here. How do you explain that on the one hand El Paso does seem to be different in terms of the relations that exist between the two groups, and yet when you look at the empirical


data of how Chicanos have done, you find that they in fact have been excluded."\(^421\)

Although World War II brought many changes for Mexican Americans in El Paso, the effects of social and economic discrimination had only begun to be modified. Nonetheless, there was no turning back. Mexican American servicemen from El Paso had roamed the world, some became officers, all had access to the GI Bill of Rights to pursue their education or get help in buying a home. The process of positive change had begun, but it would take more than a decade before discrimination against Hispanics began to significantly diminish. One army veteran, Raymond Telles, became mayor of El Paso in 1957, the first Mexican American mayor of a major U.S. city in the twentieth century.

In “Bitterness on our Border,” Stuart J. Barnes wrote about the Mexican Americans who fought, bled, and died beside their Anglo-American comrades during World War II. “They absorbed the torrents of high principled speeches and declarations concerning freedom, tolerance, world-wide security, our condemnation of racial and religious prejudice. These same sons are coming back now – those who can come back. They are coming back to be kicked out of restaurants, beaten by ‘vigilantes,’ refused decent, well-paying employment. How will they accept this status?”\(^422\)

Some historians argue that Mexican Americans in the 1930s (“the Mexican American Generation”) were already activists, and El Paso could give evidence of this in the activities of LULAC and the 1936 protest against their proposed change in status. But the war created a new sense of national feeling, a Mexican American identity, and for tens of thousands of Mexican Americans in the service a new sense of belonging. When World War II was over, they had compiled the country’s highest ethnic group proportional representation in

\(^{421}\) Interview with Fernando Oaxaca, No. 196, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

\(^{422}\) Stuart J. Barnes, “Bitterness on our Border,” in Alonso J. Perales, Are We Good Neighbors?, 83.
combat service and Medal of Honor awards.\textsuperscript{423}

The El Paso \textit{veteranos} who serve in World War II returned home to a city that had only begun to change its habits of segregation and discrimination. But already by the late 1940s, local activists began to appear. In 1948, Carey McWilliams observed of El Paso Mexican Americans, “Leaders are emerging and the days of political reckoning cannot be long delayed.”\textsuperscript{424} That same year, Raymond Telles, future mayor of El Paso, was elected county clerk. Telles was a decorated Army Air Forces major who in 1957 became El Paso’s first Hispanic mayor in the twentieth century. He went on to become the first Mexican American ambassador from the United States, serving in Costa Rica from 1961 to 1967. The 1960s was also the time when the Chicano Civil Rights Movement began to emerge. Thus, the veteranos of World War II helped establish a changing world for Mexican Americans.

\section*{Chapter 4}
\textbf{Border Women During World War II}

\textbf{From Home to Home Front}


\footnotesize\textsuperscript{424} Quoted in Mario T. Garcia, \textit{Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity}, 116.
“I honestly enjoy responsibility…. I like being at the helm even when the going gets rough. I am so sorry for those women who find the added responsibility only a discouraging drag. Being on my own affects me more as a challenge then as added burden, for which I am duly grateful”  

-- Alice Brough Baumer, 1945

This chapter will explore the shift in gender roles for American women that accurred during the war. It will explore how the experiences of women on the border mirrored or differed from the major trends in other parts of the United States. Not surprisingly, the war produced an emphasis on hyper-masculinity. Soldiers were admired for being “he-men.” As historian John Costello observed, “The notion that the sexually aggressive man makes the best fighter has been universal throughout history and in all cultures.” While men’s wartime roles emphasized the idealization of the soldier as stern, dynamic, and virile, women’s roles underwent changes as well, particularly in the economic and sexual spheres. The general public embraced the change in men’s roles, but many Americans were alarmed at the idea of a woman who was not the traditional woman tending the home fire. Popular attention on and remembrance of Rosie the Riveter has led many to assume that the war did have a transformatve effect on women at work. However, most historians of women in World War II argue that the changes were largely illusory.

425 Alice Brough Baumer to her husband, Colonel William H. Baumer, February 25, 1945, in author’s files.


Women in El Paso could not escape the broad economic and social forces sweeping across the country. Yet middle-class Anglo mothers were not likely to search out jobs—either along the border or, indeed, anywhere else in the United States. In El Paso there were no huge defense industrial plants to draw new women workers. “Male” jobs in factories were largely filled by Mexican American men, and there was no need to search beyond that available workforce. El Paso remained throughout the war classified as having “sufficient workforce” by government standards. But there were some new jobs for women at Fort Bliss and Biggs Field, and there was some evidence that more non-traditional jobs opening up to women. In general, for middle-class women there were no distinct changes in their roles. However, as elsewhere, there were more “pink-collar” jobs available to women, both because of the expansion of military bases and the shortage of men in the offices. Before the war began, about half of all clerical jobs were held by men; by the end of the war the great majority of clerks, typists, and secretaries were women. Women sometimes moved into higher-level jobs as well, but the work tended to be “for the duration.” For instance, El Paso Times editor, William J. Hooten, recalled the loss of newspapermen to war services: “We had six girl reporters, a girl telegraph editor, and even a girl police reporter. They did the best they could but we needed experienced men.”

Although job roles for women may not have changed dramatically in El Paso, certainly there were social and cultural changes—marriage and birth rates increased steadily throughout the war years, as did divorce rates. Juvenile delinquency was a widespread worry across the country, and El Paso was no exception. Public officials worried about prostitution and “victory girls”; many voiced concerns about sexual behaviors that strayed far from traditional ideals.

The study of war is important in women’s history because war underscores the social

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428 William J. Hooten, Fifty-two Years a Newsman (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1948), 120. Note the distinction between “girls” and “men.”
order; gender becomes emphasized and redefined. Until the early 1980s, World War II history was almost exclusively masculine. In this view, war was fought by men, and the few women who entered the pages of wartime history were largely following traditional paths. They were succoring women on the home front or nurses ministering to the battle-wounded. Occasionally, a Rosie the Riveter or a woman pilot received some acclaim. Usually, it was clear that the factory welder or the pilot was only there for the duration--holding on while their men fought the battles overseas. As Margaret and Patrice Higonnet observed, “Women may have been allowed to move ‘forward’ in work and social policy, but the male battlefront took economic and cultural priority. This power relationship of domination and subordination remained the same.”

Some change in gender rules took place, but they did not transform the daily lives of most border women.

Changes in Political Participation, Education, and Marriage.

The war brought many changes to the lives of in of American women in the short term, but they tended to be of limited duration. Women remained mostly in sex-segregated and lower paying jobs, but they still entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Susan B. Anthony II, niece of the celebrated women’s rights champion of the nineteenth century, felt strongly that World War II experiences could change the future of women in America. “Only in wartime does the vast energy and talent of American women begin to be unleashed,” she wrote. “No longer can women be satisfied with a backseat in Congress, with one seat in the President’s circle of advisers and administrators, and no seat on the Supreme Court. Democracy’s task is to

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elevate women so that the world is her home -- not the home her world."\textsuperscript{430} Geoffrey Perry acutely observed that had the feminist movement been as strong at the beginning of World War II as it had been in 1914 it could doubtless have scored great gains. But he believed that the Depression had absorbed whatever energies people had for social protest, and feminism, though still alive was not vibrant in 1939. Lacking its earlier leadership and organizational base, it could not capitalize on the wartime gains.\textsuperscript{431}

Nonetheless, many women did espouse changing attitudes. In a rousing speech to Junior League members in 1942, the group’s past national president thought that the many changes of wartime would be permanent. She envisioned a world where special privilege would vanish and where there would be “greater equality all around.” The rewards would be “only for work accomplished and not because of pride of place, or vested interests, or family names.”\textsuperscript{432} This must have been a surprising speech at a Junior League convention, and indeed her prediction of a meritocracy rather than a class-based society was wishful thinking. But it was not surprising that many women leaders thought that the opportunities brought about in wartime could be the harbinger of a different future. Certainly they did not predict the return to domesticity that dominated the end of the 1940s and all of the 1950s.

There was a surge of efforts to change political activity among women. El Pasoans discussed whether Texas should allow women to serve on juries. Although local judges were in favor, women were divided on the issue. There were some exaggerated claims for women’s


\textsuperscript{432} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, 8 June 1942.
aptitude for jury duty. A member of the Women’s City Government Club asserted that “women show rare intelligence and understanding,” while the president of the El Paso Women’s Club was adamant that women did not belong in politics: “The home and family is where they should stay.” The El Paso Herald Post editorialized about legal restrictions that women still faced. Because of different state laws, husbands could have control over their wives’ property, over decisions about their children, and could limit their ability to earn a living. “There is no good reason why this should be,” the paper said forthrightly.

There were also public discussions about the place of women as voters and office holders.. In 1944, the Herald Post ran an editorial about “The Women’s Vote.” It was expected that women voters would be in the majority for the national election, and the newspaper was optimistic about their power at the polls, where “they may have a healthful effect on the future of the nation.” The poll tax also attracted public scrutiny. Members of the local YWCA publically opposed the poll tax (common in Southern states) and pointed out that in Texas only one-third of eligible voters participated in the Democratic primary, which in one-party states served as the “real” election. One member summed up, “The poll tax is a tax on voting. It provides a definite economic bar to the exercise of democracy.” Women also ran for office but were not successful in El Paso. The 1944 election for City School Board attracted only 1,072 voters out of an eligible number of 16,000, despite the fact that the School Board was “one

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433 El Paso Times, 28 January 1944. Women were not allowed to serve in Texas juries until 1954.


435 El Paso Herald Post, 5 July 1944.

436 El Paso Times, 19 January 1944. The poll tax was assessed at $1.75 (about $21 in today’s dollars -- a prohibitive amount for many people.) The poll tax was not abolished in Texas until after the 1966 election.
of the most powerful governing groups in the city.\textsuperscript{437} The six candidates included three men and three women. All three men gained School Board seats; the three women all lost.

During the war, the local College of Mines saw its enrollment decline. In 1942, enrollment hit a ten-year low of 561 students, a majority of whom were women. By contrast, in the 1934-35 school year 668 students had registered, and the postwar census of 1946-47 jumped to 2,250 students. Both local newspapers chronicled the surge of women students taking “men’s subjects.” Various headlines exclaimed, “Ambitious Co-eds Overcome Prejudice and Red Tape,” “Co-eds Study Agriculture; Three Co-eds Enter Hitherto Exclusively Male Department,” “Women Urged to Make Study of Engineering,” “All Girl Staff Runs Mines Newspaper.”\textsuperscript{438} The College of Mines saw an upsurge of interest in engineering, mathematics, and science, particularly physics and chemistry, among women students. But despite all the breathless articles, when Kathleen Oechsner of El Paso graduated with honors and received an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania (the only woman in the class), the newspaper article was much smaller than the social notes on the women’s page.\textsuperscript{439}

The war-induced changes in marriage and birthrates were astonishing when compared to the Depression era during which the birthrate was particularly low. In the 1930s “the number of children relative to the rest of the population was the lowest ever of the United States. In 1940, fewer than 25 percent of Americans were below age fifteen.”\textsuperscript{440} \textit{The New York Times}

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., 2 April 1944.


\textsuperscript{439} \textit{El Paso Times}, 14 July 1944.

direly predicted an old America by 1960. Few prewar predictions imagined the coming baby boom. Although the baby boom officially lasted from 1946 to 1964, many historians point out that the marriage and birth rates escalated during the war years; some believe that the baby boom more accurately began in 1941. The war year 1942 was the highest in terms of marriages (93.0 per thousand), followed by the 1943 birth rate of 94.3 per thousand.

Throughout the war, the local papers featured long lists of marriage license applicants in El Paso. The majority of the licenses were issued to Army personnel. In 1943, for example, 3,055 couples got their marriage licenses, to set an all-time record for the city; 90 percent were military applications. Divorce rates also increased all across the country. By 1945, for every hundred couples getting married, thirty-one were legally separated.

**Women at Work–General Trends**

Americans paid attention to the growing number of working women as millions of women entered the workforce during the war. But despite the ballyhoo over women working, 30 million housewives, or 7 out of 8, were still at home in 1944. In 1940, 27.4 percent of workers were women; by 1944 that number had risen to 35 percent. In postwar 1947 women

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442 William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Daddy’s Gone to War*, 25.

443 *El Paso Times*, 28 December 1943.


made up 29.8 percent of all workers and the percentage never declined after that. The change in women’s opportunities was not as astonishing as figures of Rosie the Riveter implied. Few women were in heavy industry (and virtually none in El Paso). Women tended to regard office jobs, even at less pay, as more desirable and appropriate for themselves. Most women workers were in light industry, clerical positions, or lower level professional occupations both during and after the war.

Among white collar and professional job categories, bank employees and nurses were the most changed. Before the war, the large majority of bank clerks were men. By 1950, virtually all bank clerks were women and they held 15 percent of mid-level management jobs, most unusual at the time. Nursing was vital to the war effort, and about one-fourth of all nurses served in the military. Nursing abilities were at a premium, and the role of nurses remained non-threatening to traditional gender relationships. Because of this, D’Ann Campbell theorized that national nursing organizations were able to professionalize after the war--one of the few areas where women clearly gained. In the war years, national average salaries for teachers, nurses, and clerks were all about at the same level. This relationship was also true locally, but El Paso salaries were significantly lower. For example, at the beginning of the war, annual national teachers’ salaries stood at $1,441. El Paso teachers only averaged $1,000 per annum. Local nurses’ pay ranged from $900 to $1,200 annually. Despite the fact that women found more job opportunities, their pay was almost never commensurate with equivalent jobs.


held by males. Often employers resorted to changing job descriptions to insure lower wages. Women were paid on average only 60 percent of what men earned in the same job.\textsuperscript{450} Despite the lower pay and fewer opportunities than men had, 75 percent of working women surveyed by the Women’s Bureau wanted to continue at their jobs after the war.\textsuperscript{451}

\textbf{Upscale Jobs}

During the war, local newspapers were fascinated by the changes in women’s employment (perhaps because there were many more newspaper women during the war), and regularly published stories about women at work. One of the most telling series of articles was about the possibility of a woman mayor of El Paso.\textsuperscript{452} One female \textit{El Paso Times} reporter covering the local debate commented that “women here and elsewhere in a world devastated by war are doing some serious thinking about their share of responsibility for the chaotic situation. But women in general shy off from doing anything concrete about it -- such as taking a hand in government.” As a local (male) lawyer said cautiously, “I don’t see why a woman wouldn’t be just as efficient in governmental affairs as a man provided, of course, she’s qualified and competent. Remember Texas doesn’t even allow women to sit on its juries; whether or not El Paso is ready for such radical innovation as a women for mayor is rather a far fetched question.”\textsuperscript{453}

\textsuperscript{450} William H. Chafe, \textit{The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II}, 106.


\textsuperscript{452} El Paso has had only one woman mayor, Suzie Azar, who was elected Mayor in 1988.

\textsuperscript{453} \textit{El Paso Times}, 4 December 1943.
The *El Paso Times* reported that local women leaders had reacted positively to the possibility of a woman mayor. One El Paso woman, past chairman (sic) director of the Women’s Division of the Chamber of Commerce, had some far-reaching ideas about women’s roles. According to her, “Men and women have worked shoulder to shoulder in this war as never before, demonstrating that when the common purpose is for the common good the old hostility and antagonisms vanish. To me, the proposal of a woman mayor seems a good one.”

It is not clear whether there was an actual potential woman candidate for mayor. Of all the women interviewed (all heads of women’s organizations), only one was reluctant to embrace the idea of a woman mayor.

As the war progressed, El Paso women discovered new job opportunities as reporters, radio newscasters, announcers, proof readers, copy writers, and accountants. “A woman today does not have to choose between being a schoolteacher, clerk, or stenographer,” declared the *El Paso Times* in 1943.

The press was quick to headline the arrival of female physicians. Dr. Margaret L. Davis was named assistant director of the City-County Health Unit, with an annual salary of $3,000. Her salary was three times what County nurses received but considerably less than the $5,500 received by the county sheriff, tax collector, country clerk, and county judge. The *Herald Post* speculated that she could be in line to be Health Director if director Dr. W.B. Porthro was called to active duty in the Army. However, Porthro was able to maintain reserve status and remain as Health Director throughout the war. Local newspapers also welcomed another woman doctor, Dr. Vance Thompson Alexander, and described her as “a slender,

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454 *El Paso Times.*, 26 November 1943.

455 Ibid., 11 March 1943.
brown-eyed woman with a Southern accent and a sense of humor.” Needless to say, no male doctor would have been described in such a fashion.

**Women in “Men’s Jobs”**

Wartime exigencies meant a greater need to recruit women for additional men’s jobs. El Paso women soon found opportunities to work as taxi drivers, street car and bus operators, repair workers, “call boys,” meter readers, watch repairers, telegraph messengers, all to replace men serving in the armed forces. Local newspapers published dozens of articles describing women in the new roles. However, none of these articles mentioned Mexican American women. Because of continuing discrimination, many jobs were simply not available to them. Lucy Acosta, who later became an important community leader, recalled, “It took a war to educate a lot of us and open our eyes to how we were being treated, and how much more we needed to educate ourselves and promote ourselves in order to survive.” Ceil Concha, a long-time El Paso resident, faced job discrimination after graduating from high school. As she later recalled, “The Electric Company, El Paso Natural Gas, the newspapers…I just couldn’t get in the door.”

The local newspapers covered women’s joy over their unexpected job opportunities. A mother of two whose husband was serving in the Army was delighted with her first outside job as a taxi driver. “I doubt I ever will be satisfied to go back to dishwashing every day,” she

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457 World War II Border Homefront Conference, University of Texas at El Paso, Department of History and Institute of Oral History, November 11-12, 1995.
At the start of the war, with the draft taking many men out of the workforce, taxicab companies expected to lose drivers. Still, old attitudes persisted. “If it becomes necessary we will hire women chauffeurs, said one taxi company official. “But we won’t unless we have to.” The El Paso Electric Company, which also ran city streetcars and buses, was more positive about female help as their ridership increased significantly. They advertised, “More and more you’ve noticed women operating streetcars and buses, and doing a splendid job of it, too.” Nearly all the local newspaper articles emphasized the newness of women in what had been exclusively male jobs. Gasoline stations hired female attendants for the first time. Women at the train station began selling tickets, which apparently had been was a man’s exclusive role. “Veteran railroad men said no woman had ever before sold train tickets in a metropolitan office. For a woman to be selling tickets is a brand new innovation, reported the El Paso Times. The Electric Company also hired many women to repair electric stoves, refrigerators, or meters. One eager young employee described her repair work: “The only thing I hate about this is I’ll have to give it up when the war is over. I don’t see why this should only be a man’s job.” Many articles carefully pointed out that the “men’s jobs” were only available because the men were in “Uncle Sam’s fighting forces.” The implication was that once the war was over, women would no longer hold “men’s jobs.”

The El Paso Herald Post observed that the Army had taken to feminine employees far

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458 El Paso Times, 31 August 1942.
460 El Paso Times, 1 March 1943.
461 Ibid., 11 October 1942
462 El Paso Herald Post, 9 July 1942
more readily than private industry. Women were airplane and automotive mechanics, sheet metal workers, and truck drivers at Fort Bliss and Biggs Field. It wasn’t always a smooth adjustment. When the first women carpenter arrived at a Fort Bliss site, she was greeted with whistles, hoots, and catcalls. Women mechanics served at Fort Bliss, where 25 were already employed by June of 1943. Newspaper readers were assured that the female mechanics trained under the guidance of skilled men. At the same time, there were already 20 civilian women truck drivers at Fort Bliss. A typical article described a “grandma” who laid aside her knitting to “keep the Jap away from the door.” At Biggs Field, 41 of the 49 motor pool drivers were military wives. Some of their husbands served in Africa, the Pacific, Europe, or were simply listed as “overseas.” (One of the drivers was notified that her husband was missing in action.)

Women in the Military

In the spring of 1942, Congressional debate over establishing the WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) revealed the uneasiness of conservatives over women’s changing roles. Congressman Clare Hoffman seemed a little panicky. He asked, “Who then will maintain the home fires; who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself; who will rear and nurture the children; who will teach them patriotism and loyalty; who will make men of them, so that, when their day comes, they,

463 Ibid., 11 October 1942, 3 June 1943, 1 July 1943.

464 El Paso Times, 7 September 1943.
too, may march away to war?\textsuperscript{465} Congressman Hoffman was not alone in his concern that traditional gender roles might be upset by the emergence of World War II. Most traditionalists, though, would have put motherhood at the top of the list, not cooking and mending. And motherhood was not usually presented as a duty to rear new soldiers for the next war. Although Congressman Hoffman seemed extreme in his alarm, the bill to establish the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps ran up against similar rhetoric from other members of Congress. The bill nonetheless eventually passed both Houses of Congress on May 14, 1942.\textsuperscript{466} The bill provided that a ceiling of 2 percent of the military could be women, hardly enough to douse the home fires that Hoffman was so concerned about. The overriding reason to establish the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) was to free up more men for combat. The technological war was also a clerical war, and some Army leaders were anxious to utilize women for these tasks. In the end, 70 percent of WACs had clerical and communications jobs that did not challenge sex-segregated ideas. Nonetheless, there were some new opportunities. Wacs worked as weather observers, in radio and cryptographic (secret code) jobs, control tower operations, air craft reconnaissance, laboratory technology, chemical clean-up and mechanical repair.\textsuperscript{467}

For some cultural conservatives, though, the mere notion of women in the military caused great consternation. Scandal and innuendo bedeviled the WAC throughout the war, not so much because of the behavior of military women as the unwillingness of people to accept the idea of women soldiers. Wacs were caught in the crossfire. If they retained their “femininity” they were, by assumption, not competent soldiers. If they demonstrated assertiveness and competent


\textsuperscript{466} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{467} James W. Lee, ed., *Texas Goes to War*, 166.
abilities, they were somehow “mannish.” As Leisa Meyer pointed out, there was an inordinate amount of public attention given to Wac’s behavior and looks, and to details of their uniform and hairstyles. One civilian woman proposed that the WAC adopt trousers in a slightly different color than men’s in order to avoid “any feelings on the part of the male officers and men that [the women] were trying to wear the pants.”\(^{468}\) In the end, the Women’s Army Corps decided not to have slacks as part of the WAC uniform. Director Oveta Culp Hobby made every effort to present the WAC experience as akin to that of a women’s college. Army women were supposed to be well educated, demure, middle-class white women. They were not to have the sexual freedom of their male counterparts; even information about birth control and venereal disease was proscribed. Sexual attitudes were typical of the double standard at the time. Men were free to be sexually active (and the majority were), but women in the military who had active sex lives risked being discharged.

Oveta Culp Hobby provided excellent leadership for the Women’s Army Corps. Hobby, the 37-year-old wife of former Texas Governor William Hobby, had far more experience than most women of her time. She was executive vice president of the Houston Post newspaper and also for radio station KPRC, and a member of the Texas Bar.\(^{469}\) Senator Pappy O’Daniel waxed eloquent over Oveta Hobby. He described her as “a Texas housewife, a Texas mother, a Texas leader, a wonderful woman typical of thousands of our Texas women. She marched forth with her children tugging at her skirt, another Texas Pioneer Mother fighting beside our men folks to help make this world safe for democracy.”\(^{470}\) Hobby’s 10-year-old son and

\(^{468}\) Leisa Meyers, Creating G.I. Jane, 155.

\(^{469}\) El Paso Herald Post, 13 May 1942.

\(^{470}\) El Paso Times, 1 June 1942.
5-year-old daughter were presumably not tugging at her skirt as she guided the WAC, “the petticoat army” as the United Press designated it, into war. 471 Despite her stellar background, Hobby was only given the equivalent of a major’s rank, at $3,000 a year.

Initial plans called for the recruitment of 150,000 women into the WAC, but the first mobilization was limited to 25,000. Recruitment proved more difficult than expected, and the Corps only reached 140,000 enlistees at its peak. An advertisement appearing in both El Paso newspapers to shore up recruitment of Wacs misleadingly claimed that “hundreds of thousands of women are needed.” 472 Part of the ad reflected a description of women’s military service that could cause resentment among male recruits, since women were described as taking over the safe, non-combat jobs. “Over the oceans loaded troopships are carrying new thousands of soldiers to join our attacking armies at the front. And every soldier who goes out to the fighting front must be replaced in an Army job behind the lines.” The Fort Bliss News tried to be more diplomatic: Wacs were at first described as reducing the number of men who would otherwise have been called to military duty. But later, the paper explained that “the Wacs will relieve men now handling these jobs [at Fort Bliss], making them available for combat duty.” 473

Because of traditional wage inequities, Wacs were in line for lower pay that their male equivalents. Initial pay for regular Wac enlistees was $21 per month, with a raise to $30 thereafter. In contrast, officers were paid between $1,500 and $2,000, considerably more than

471 El Paso Herald Post, 15 May 1942. The WAC was originally called the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps but was changed to Women’s Army Corps in September, 1943, at the same time that the Wacs were given the right to the postwar GI Bill.


473 Fort Bliss News, 22 July; 9 September 1943.
most could have earned in the private sector. Women had to be between 20 and 41 (later raised to 50) years of age, and to have no dependents and no children under 14. There were no restrictions on Wacs marrying men in the service. In mid 1943, 70 percent of Wacs were single, 15 percent married, and 15 percent divorced, separated, or widowed. Wacs in general had higher education levels than the men in the Army; 42 percent had high school degrees and another 11 percent had gone to college. One issue that died aborning was the suggestion of establishing a West Point for women. Apparently Army officials were apoplectic about the idea. They joked about playing the annual Army-Navy basketball game with girls’ rules. The El Paso Times quoted one officer as saying, “Unless they plan to make women major generals and let them plan strategy there is no excuse for a woman’s West Point. Unless we plan an Amazon society the idea is pointless.” Obviously, it was inconceivable at the time that there would eventually be women major generals planning strategy and that women cadets would be part of West Point.

There were a few glamorous jobs open to women in the military. Approximately 1,000 women pilots ferried planes and cargo throughout the United States, enjoying considerable prestige. There were women flight instructors too at pilot schools. However, relatively few women served in jobs that were different than what they could have done in civilian life. Hispanic women from El Paso joined the military and, surprisingly, this seemed to be well

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474 El Paso Herald Post, 13 May 1942.

475 Ibid., 5 March 1943.

476 Leisa Meyer, Creating G.I. Jane, 63.

477 James W. Lee, ed., Texas Goes to War, 166.

478 El Paso Times 22 November 1944.
covered in the local newspapers. Although no Mexican American women were featured in articles about the new opportunities for women at work, many were noted for their military service. About a third of all the military women featured were Hispanic. In addition, the WAC recruited nationally for a squadron “composed solely of women of Spanish-American heritage.”

El Paso women tended to join the WAC; it was the largest of the women’s services which included the Navy Waves (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), the Coast Guard Spars (short for the Coast Guard motto, Semper Paratus [Always Ready], the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (the only one without an acronym), and the WASPs, the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots. El Pasoans soon became used to the idea of Wacs since there was a contingent at Fort Bliss and WASP pilots were assigned to Biggs Airfield. Even the annual Sun Book beauty queen celebration included a “duchess” who was serving as a Navy Lieutenant.

The first group of local applicants for the WAC included two waitresses, a laboratory technician, a schoolteacher, a photographer, and a housewife. Although the recruitment ads emphasized the rewards of patriotism, some applicants had practical reasons as well. One young lady said she simply wanted to get away from El Paso. When asked about her decision, another recruit explained, “Why should the men do it all?” And a third declared, “I believe I can help by enlisting and I know it will help me.”

Charlee Kelly, daughter of a former El Paso mayor, gave up teaching math at El Paso High School to become an officer in the WAC. She eventually became one of four candidates to head the Women’s Army Corps and retire as a Lt. Colonel.


480 *El Paso Herald Post*, 1 August 1942.

Most captivating to newspaper reporters were the Women’s Air Force Service pilots, including several from El Paso.

The *Fort Bliss News*, the post’s own newspaper, remained fascinated by the Wacs. “Beauty Shop at Bliss,” was a headline in September 1942. The Wacs “turned frivolous when they attended a party in their honor.” On the first-year anniversary of the WAC, the newspaper extolled their “bang-up job of proving to brother Army men and to the people of this nation that women had a definite place in our fighting set-up.” At the end of the war, the WAC prepared to downsize. Just three weeks after the war in Europe was over, the WAC reduced the enlistment age limit (from 50). Nonetheless, the WAC continued in existence until 1978, when military women were made part of the regular Army.

**Prostitution and Victory Girls**

One of the most profound changes of the World War II home front concerned sexual mores. Not surprisingly, there was an increase of prostitution in areas near military bases. But unexpectedly, there was also a new sexual phenomena, that of the “victory girl.” A number of authors have chronicled the wartime changes in American sex life. John Costello thought that “while many of women’s wartime economic gains were given up in the retreat to postwar domesticity after 1945, the seeds of a profound sexual revolution had already been sown.” Allan Brandt, in his history of venereal disease, pointed out that throughout the war there were tensions between those primarily concerned about disease and those who were chiefly concerned with sexual mores. Michael Adams considered that “the movement of millions of people

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created a breakdown in traditional behavior patterns. And some people away from the watchful eye of relatives and neighbors did violate hometown mores.” Karen Andersen discussed how both national and local programs theoretically organized to control venereal disease activity were a form of discrimination and control of women’s lives. She concluded that continuity of prewar values about women’s behavior won the day. Marilyn Hegarty’s “Patriot or Prostitutes?” examined the simultaneous mobilization of men and the control of female sexuality during World War II. She contended that although wartime women took on “male” jobs and had more social freedom, the traditional woman and girl remained the symbol of stability.  

Both El Paso and Juarez had long attempted to control of prostitution through “Zones of Tolerance.” The Zones of Tolerance (the same name was employed in Mexico) were segregated areas for prostitutes. They were registered, licensed, and regularly examined for venereal disease. During the 1930s, these regulated prostitutes paid $14.50 a month licensing fees, had weekly health examinations for gonorrhea and syphilis, and a monthly blood test for syphilis. The system, which closely resembled the French approach, had the support of most local officials and doctors. Local officials emphasized the control of venereal disease through regulation rather than suppression of prostitution. “In El Paso, the police didn’t detain women for being prostitutes. They confined prostitutes who were diseased,” observed Ann Gabbert.


485 Ibid., 314.
Unfortunately, weekly inspections could not guarantee a “clean girl.” A prostitute could service a hundred or more customers a week; presumably she could become infected or reinfected with her very first customer after she obtained her weekly clearance.

The notion of the Zone of Tolerance came under attack in late 1937 and 1938. This campaign was brought on by complaints from a popular local minister, as well as the activist Justice of the Peace C.M. Wilchar. The appearance of graft and underworld activities in Mayor M.A. Harlan’s administration also contributed to the demand for change. The Mayor hastened to respond to citizens’ complaints by declaring that prostitution would no longer be tolerated in his city and ordered a raid on the Zone. But closing the Zone did not, of course, eliminate vice. In fact, by August 1939, both the police and Mayor J. E. Anderson supported the idea of reopening the Zone. The otherwise conservative mayor said, “We’ll try and keep it as decent as possible -- you know a thing like this can’t be decent but we’ll keep it as regulated and clean as we can. [The] restricted district would be better than the situation is now.” But the mayor and his police chief were assailed by local religious groups and dropped the plan almost immediately.

The following year the Zone was again being discussed. The El Paso Herald Post reported that “the establishment of a restricted district under police supervision was under consideration today as the result of arrests of 29 girls from South El Paso.” Police Chief L.T. Ropey said that reports from Fort Bliss indicated an increase in venereal disease and that this concern prompted the roundup. Fort Bliss officials denied there was any such increase, but that

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seems unlikely. However, Fort Bliss was in the midst of a great expansion that already meant an increase of thousands of young men stationed in El Paso. In any case, many proponents of segregated zones with inspection and regulation of the prostitutes remained convinced of the efficacy of this approach to controlling the spread of venereal disease.

In the early part of the 1940s, the assumption was that prostitutes were the source of venereal disease and thus needed to be carefully regulated. Astonishingly, throughout the war the constant message in government publications and newspapers alike was that women were the only responsible agents in disseminating venereal disease. Police Chief Robey declared, “Fort Bliss authorities are asking us to help keep the venereal rate among its soldiers down, and the best way to do this is to combat the disease at its source, girls and women.”

Allan Brandt, author of *No Magic Bullet*, found that all the posters produced to inform soldiers about the dangers of venereal disease portrayed VD as a woman. It was commonly accepted that controlling women would control venereal disease. Somehow, men were not cited as a source of syphilis and gonorrhea, as if they were only caused by females. Men were not blamed for sexual activity, and only women were identified as “promiscuous.” A telling example was that during the war only 273 military men were convicted of rape out of twelve million men in service.

Another flagrant accusation was described in an *El Paso Times* article: After the July 1942 arrest of a 17-year-old girl, her soldier accuser was “reported to be married and the father of two children, who had admitted he had been in her company, stood before her hurling recrimination at the girl.” The soldier was returned to his unit; the girl was sent to

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489 *El Paso Times*, 24 September 1943.


491 Leisa M. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 139.
Often the blame toward women was vituperative. Women who supposedly spread these diseases among soldiers were characterized by Dr. D. A. Price, special agent in the FBI, as saboteurs “almost as deadly and destructive as those who blow up planes and sink ships.” Dr. W.B. Portro, director of the City-County Heath Unit, compared the attempts to control venereal disease with those to eliminate malaria by tracing it to its source, the mosquito. “The mosquito was eliminated; it is too bad we can’t eliminate prostitution. The prostitute is the source of venereal disease.” Then Tom B. White, warden of the nearby federal prison at La Tuna, New Mexico, thundered, “This program [of rehabilitation of women arrested for sexual conduct] is as important as killing a damn Jap, Dago, or Nazi.”

The federal government weighed in with the creation of a new agency, the Social Protection Division of the office of Community War Services. The Social Protection Division was headed by Eliot Ness, already celebrated for his crackdown on vice and organized crime in Cleveland. The Division supported local efforts to curtail prostitution and conducted studies in El Paso.

The military was certainly aware of the explosive effect of millions of young men serving at Army and Navy bases. The Army was worried that “thousands of women of ill repute have become public camp followers and are assembling in communities adjacent to practically every Army post and cantonment throughout the country for the purpose of engaging in immoral and illicit conduct.”

A prewar Conference of Morale Officers in February 1941, focused on the dangers of prostitution, still assuming that prostitutes were by far the major source of VD. Dr.

492 El Paso Times, 21 July 1942.

493 Ibid., 17 July 1942.

494 El Paso Herald Post, n.d. 1941. From the El Paso City-County Health District 1941 scrapbook.
Joseph Earle Moore, Chief of the Syphilis Division of the Medical Clinic, Johns Hopkins University, advised the conference that the vigorous repression of prostitutes was a necessary control measure. He advocated repression of prostitution and explained to the assembled morale officers, “The word ‘repression’ is carefully chosen instead of the stronger term ‘suppression,’ since experience has shown that much may be accomplished in repression, whereas suppression is a Utopian and unattainable aim.”

Dr. Moore reassured his audience that if “flagrant solicitation on the streets, in cabarets, dance halls, and honky tonks was vigorously repressed the number of contacts with a prostitute can make in a given time is reduced from the not unusual record of 50-70 per night to a much smaller quota; and the number of men one prostitute can infect is therefore decreased.”

This curious notion of “repression” also failed to realize that prostitution would not be the major source of venereal disease during the war. But the military persisted in plans to curtail prostitution and emphasized opening more recreational facilities replete with volunteer hostesses.

Bascom Johnson, Jr., M.D., of the U.S. Public Health Service began an epidemiological study of venereal disease among Army personnel in the El Paso/Juarez area, beginning in March 1941. Fort Bliss had already grown to 25,000 troops by that date, months before the United States entered the war. Dr. Johnson gathered case histories of Fort Bliss soldiers who came down with VD. According to his interviews, the majority of men were infected by prostitutes. Dr. Johnson began his study at a time when sexual activity was changing rapidly across the

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495 “Repression” meant to significantly decrease the number of available prostitutes as opposed to “suppression,” meaning elimination of prostitution.

496 Joint Army and Navy Committee Conference of Morale Officers, Office of Community War Services, Social Protection Division, February 1941, RG 215, Box 44. National Archives, College Park, MD.

nation. From March 9, 1941 to August 25, 1942, he traced the sources of venereal disease among soldiers in El Paso and Juarez.

In general, Dr. Johnson believed that the major source of venereal disease came from prostitution in both cities. In the first three and half months, according to his report, prostitution conditions were flagrant in both El Paso and Juarez. In a July talk to the Central Council of Social Agencies, Johnson declared that there were three sources of action that could be undertaken: “One is the segregation of the prostitutes, another is for the Army to conduct a corral, where the women would be kept and where both men and women could be examined, and the third is for suppression of prostitution.”

Needless to say, no “corral” was set up, and Dr. Johnson himself favored “suppression.” The situation changed rapidly in the next three months as houses of prostitution were closed in El Paso but remained completely available in Juarez, and at one-half the price, 50 cents instead of the El Paso charge of one dollar. Johnson noted that in October 1941, El Paso houses of prostitution reopened rather quietly and were allowed to operate surreptitiously off and on until the following February.

After the United States declared war against the Axis on December 8, 1941, American soldiers were not allowed to cross over to Juarez until February 27, 1942. Thus, Juarez as a place of exposure dropped to 2 percent of all Fort Bliss V.D. cases in that three month period. But once the International Bridge was reopened to the military, the percentage of infected soldiers who had gone to Juarez climbed rapidly.

The Army erected prophylactic stations on

498 El Paso Times, July 1941.


500 The border at Juarez was closed again in 1944 in January, July, and August.

the American side of the bridge and issued orders that all members of the U.S. armed forces had to take the “pro treatment” on return from Juarez. Then on June 19, 1942, Juarez officials began an aggressive campaign to close their city’s red light district. Once again, the number of VD cases originating across the border plummeted.

Good intentions on both sides of the border seemed not effective in banning prostitution. Throughout the war there were articles in both the El Paso Times and the Herald Post lamenting the continuation of professional prostitution. Some people remained convinced that Zones of Tolerance were the best solution. But according to a 1944 government report, Dr. Johnson “did much to convince the medical men that it is impossible to effectively segregate, regulate, and inspect prostitution.” Both El Paso and Juarez, from June 1941 until June of 1942, offered conditions similar to a controlled experiment since the houses of prostitution were closed and reopened several times during that period of time. Dr. Johnson concluded his study in August of 1942. By that time, he believed that the role of the prostitute in the spread of venereal disease had gradually decreased and that others, “such as ‘non-prostitutes pick-ups,’ have begun to assume relatively more importance as a source of infection.”

What is more, penicillin would bring additional changes to sexual mores and disease rates in the final two years of the war. By mid-1943, the drug was available to men in uniform, and almost magically, the threat of syphilis and gonorrhea, and official fears over their spread, declined dramatically.


**Khaki Wackies and Cuddle Bunnies**

Although there was continuing discussion about prostitution, there began to be an awareness that “promiscuous women” were an increasing source of worry. It was eventually clear to military and civilian authorities alike that “victory girls” were displacing prostitutes. A San Antonio social worker reported, “The girls [prostitutes] are sore as all get out. They say the young chippies who work for a beer and a sandwich are cramping their style.” There were many nicknames for these girls: patriotutes, cuddle bunnies, khaki wackies, and good-time Charlottes. As D’Ann Campbell noted, “They might not consider having sex with a civilian but it was considered ‘patriotic’ to do so with a serviceman.”

It was estimated that 85 percent of the girls near army camps who had frequent sex with soldiers were not prostitutes. Many of these “khaki wackies” looked like the girl next door. Allan Brandt, in his book *No Magic Bullet*, noted the change. The Army now emphasized in its educational literature for soldiers that those “victory girls” could be just as infectious as the experienced prostitute. The salient difference was that khaki wackies and cuddle bunnies didn’t charge for sex. The most widely circulated World War II pamphlet was entitled, “She Looked Clean But….” Again, such literature repeated the sorry association of “cleanliness” with chastity, impurity with disease.

About these women a federal committee noted: “She is more dangerous to the community than a mad dog. Rabies can be recognized. Gonorrhea and syphilis ordinarily cannot.” As usual, women were depicted as diseased and men as the innocent victims.

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505 Geoffrey Perry, *Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph*, 34.

506 D’Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 32.


There was probably a certain class distinction in sexual behavior, as more upper class whites sought to describe the prostitutes and victory girls as different from their daughters. Perhaps they were, and therein may lie an explanation of how the “khaki-wackies” were treated. Many were married, and some had children. Despite their young age, many were not the equivalent of the American ideal of high school students. Victory girls were very young. Estimates ranged from 12 years old to their early twenties, but most often they were thought to be from 14 to 17.\textsuperscript{509} Stories in local newspapers indicate support of this assumption. A 1942 survey revealed that only 25 percent of single men and 40 percent of single women abstained sexually. Of course surveys of this nature were not necessarily accurate, but they suggested an indication of the direction the country was taking.

Between 1939 and 1945 there was a 42 percent increase in the illegitimate birth rate to ten per thousand newborns. The divorce rate rose rapidly, from 17 percent in 1940 to 27 percent in 1944.\textsuperscript{510} The El Paso city council attempted to reduce the ease of sexual encounters. The council passed an ordinance in November, 1943 making it unlawful for any person under the age of 17 years to be on or in any street, alley, or public place between the hours of 10 pm and 6 am.\textsuperscript{511} Originally the intent was to ban only girls but the final version of the ordinance extended the curfew to both girls and boys. The ordinance was all encompassing; the banned public places were listed as “any theater, carnival, show, store, restaurant, soft drink stand, hotel lobby, park, plaza or square.” It seems unlikely that the curfew could be so strictly enforced, but it gave the police a useful tool which could be used to regulate sexuality.

\textsuperscript{509} Emily Yellin, \textit{Our Mother’s War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 316.

\textsuperscript{510} Michael C.C. Adams, \textit{The Best War Ever}, 123.

\textsuperscript{511} El Paso City Ordinance approved 11 November 1943.
El Paso Rapid Treatment Center

Rapid Treatment Centers were set up across the country during the war in an effort to control venereal disease and -- some would say -- to control women’s sexuality. There were at least thirty rehabilitation centers of this kind; El Paso’s was the first in the Southwest. This attempt to control sexual behavior was, once again, entirely concentrated on females. There were no legal ramifications from arresting and detaining girls simply on suspension of “delinquency” or “vagrancy.”\(^\text{512}\) Arrested women were routinely examined for VD, a procedure that could mean four to five days in jail, whether or not they were guilty of criminal activity. Across the country, most courts said that “jailing the women was acceptable because it was necessary to protect public health. The male partners of these women were almost never arrested and certainly not prosecuted. The bottom line was clear. Men’s sexual needs come first.”\(^\text{513}\)

The Center was intended to treat VD, or as a local newspaper described it, it was “a hospital for the treatment and rehabilitation of women suffering from social diseases.” Dr. W.B. Porthro, director of the City-County Health Unit, said that the hospital was not being established for the sole purpose of treating social diseases, but rather a combined treatment and, as he put it earlier in another article, “for the rehabilitation of fallen and diseased women.” The sojourn in the treatment center could be lengthy. In 1943, Dr Prothro assured newspaper readers that “modern rapid-type treatment for syphilis effects cures within a few weeks, at

\(^{512}\) Emily Yellin, *Our Mother’s War*, 316.

\(^{513}\) Ibid., 319.
most.”

The Rapid Treatment Center, also known as the Mountain View Quarantine Hospital, opened on March 15, 1943. One of the first federal government reports was submitted in August 1943 by the ironically named Howard M. Slutes. The great majority, 89 percent, of women admitted came from the County Jail. Although the Center was intended to deal with venereal disease, about a third of all the women admitted were “non-infectious.” A second government report was issued in May of 1944. It gave a summary of the first nine months of operation through December 6, 1943. A study of 94 admissions in September and October 1943 elucidated some surprising statistics. The report summarized that the average girl who came to the Rapid Treatment Center was 20 years of age, had less than an eighth grade education, left home to marry a soldier, and came to El Paso to be near her husband. The report stated, “This mythical average girl usually leaves home to marry because of unpleasant conditions, generally because her home was broken because of the death or desertion of one of the parents. This average girl came to El Paso with a very minimum of working experience hence she was able to obtain employment only as a waitress.”

The study discussed the factors “which may be contributing causes of sex delinquency and prostitution.” The greatest number of admissions were women age 18, 20, and 21. Their education level ranged from none to high school graduates; only one-third attended any high school at all. Their marital status was surprising: only 18 were single, 26 married, 10 divorced, 7

514 El Paso Herald Post, 28 February 1943.

515 Report to Eliot Ness, Director of Social Protection Division from Howard M. Slutes, 30 August 1943, Study of Rapid Treatment Center, El Paso, Texas. Community War Services, Social Protection Division RG 215 43, Box 2, National Archives, College Park, MD.

widowed, 23 separated from the husbands, 6 deserted, and 4 undetermined. Among the married women, 15 had been married twice and 6 were wed three times. These marriage statistics are all the more astounding because they describe a group of women who averaged only 20 years of age. Further, the great majority of these very young women had children. Only 13 percent had no children, 33 percent had one, 24 percent two, 19 percent three, 6 percent four, and even 4 percent had five children. Among their occupations, half of them were waitresses, domestics, or barmaids. Nearly all earned between $12 and $18 a week. The 22 girls who earned $18 a week actually received almost as much as El Paso teachers and nurses. The sexual promiscuity of “khaki wackies” may have been a part of wartime America, but the postwar world frowned on such behavior.

The Rapid Treatment Center did not long survive. Once penicillin became available to the general public in late 1944 (in the previous year it was reserved for the military), patients were released within seven days. These who had gonorrhea were released within 24 hours. This contrasted with the previous hospitalization lasting from three weeks to six months. Not only was the confinement period lessened to a few days or less, but also the aim of “protecting” the boys in the military was no longer a major concern as the war drew to a close in August, 1945.

**Home Front Volunteers**

Volunteer service in the community offered women who maintained their traditional status

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517 Report on Repression Program in El Paso, Texas, Table No. 9.

518 *El Paso Times*, 1 April 1945; *El Paso Herald Post*, 27 November 1943.
as housewives the opportunity to participate in the war effort without breaking established views of proper gender roles. World War II volunteer organizations were basically white middle-class women “contributing to the war effort.” Some volunteer jobs were useful but many were limited to make-work tasks. A few volunteer assignments were hard work, like those involving specific hospital responsibilities. Some volunteers helped out by having fun -- the hostesses at military dances, for example. And some did make-work jobs like those organized by the Red Cross to fold bandages. Very few minority women were welcomed by volunteer organizations. Working-class women, while also eager to volunteer, had less time and mobility. As D’Ann Campbell has written, “The real contribution of volunteer work was to raise morale, and that was very effective. After all, America was far from actual war, and all these volunteer activities gave people a sense of participation.”

The Red Cross had millions of volunteers in the U.S. They worked in military and civilian hospitals, collected blood, knit sweaters for the troops, and rolled bandages. Much of this was calculated to give volunteers a sense of purpose but was without significant value. But the Red Cross nurse’s aides program did seem to have real impact. The aides had an introductory 80-hour training course. The services performed by these volunteer nurse’s aides included feeding of patients who were unable to feed themselves, making beds, taking pulse and temperatures, giving baths, and assisting with medical records. By 1944, 50,000 graduate nurses were serving in the Army and Navy Nurses Corps. The El Paso Times observed, “Hospitals turned more and more to the Red Cross nurse’s aides to help meet the situation caused

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519 D’Ann Campbell, Women at War with America, 71.

520 El Paso Herald Post, 15 April 1942.
by the mounting shortage of trained personnel.”521 Some of these volunteers even worked full-time at other jobs.

Yet often volunteers were engaged in a tremendous amount of busy work. The *El Paso Times* wrote a condescending editorial on “Women Work to Help” which concluded, “All American women need is direction, which means for someone to tell them what to do.”522 That “someone” was presumably a male. Mabel Vaughn Kenney described the newspapers coverage of constant recycling drives:523 Volunteers collected scrap metal, waste paper, cooking grease, and even hair. The *El Paso Herald Post* described an early scrap metal drives. “Housewives piled up tin cans and coffee pots, scrap ranging from aluminum to costume jewelry, from tires and inner tubes to electric heaters and oil stoves and radios.” The newspaper reported that in the more affluent parts of town the piles before the homes were small and scarce. In poorer sections, the stacks before grassless yards were large, rusty, and valuable. Many of these items were not usable, but scrap drives continued throughout the war, often as much as a propaganda tool as a practical one. The *El Paso Times* noted that a May 1945 paper drive had a goal of 500,000 pounds of paper, “with which 125,000 thirty caliber bullets would be made with which 125,000 Japs would be killed (sic).” According to Kenney, there were many cooking grease collections because “when housewives understand that glycerin was made from old grease and the explosives have need for glycerin they would redouble their efforts to aid in every way possible.” (It was not clear whether that meant more women should save grease for donation, or that homemakers should cook more greasy food.) Even human hair was collected,

521 *El Paso Times*, 1 March 1944.

522 *El Paso Times*, 30 December 1944.

apparently needed “in the manufacturing of twenty or more gadgets, the most important of which were gun sights.”

In the beginning of the war, there was initial concern about the possibility of an air attack. El Paso Civilian Defense Council volunteers were air raid wardens, fire watchers, and emergency food and housing division volunteers. Although an *El Paso Times* article counted 928 active volunteers, there were 3,254 women registered in the Women’s Division. Yet Mrs. Gerald Johnson, Chairman (sic) of the Division, said that there was a need for additional volunteers, because “with a shortage of servants many women who had been working long hours now have to devote more time in their homes.”

In many articles on volunteers there was a fondness for a large number, often exaggerated or even unlikely. For instance, the *El Paso Times* lauded the 25,000 Junior Red Cross members in the El Paso School District. Yet there were only 20,450 students between 6 and 17 years old enrolled in public schools that year. Not to be outdone, the YMCA claimed an annual total of 44,179 participants.” The most egregious make-work activity was the Red Cross Production Corps, whose volunteers folded bandages and knit clothes for the troops. It was unnecessary work. One woman described her experience when she and a friend volunteered to roll bandages. As she explained, “My friend’s husband was a doctor and she watched this operation awhile with ten or twelve women doing their slow, painstaking work, then went to the director and said, ‘Look, down at the hospital they’ve got a cutting machine. Give it all to me and I’ll

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525 *El Paso Times*, 17 August 1942.

526 Ibid., 16 November 1942.

527 *El Paso Times*, 17 February 1942.
An El Paso Times news story exposed the extent to which the Red Cross organized volunteers to do these unnecessary tasks. The Times wrote that the local Red Cross had only 38 nurse’s aides, but 2,049 Production Corps volunteers making surgical dressings and knitted sweaters.\(^529\) In 1943, nearly a million surgical dressings were prepared in El Paso alone, all of which could have been done much more rapidly by machine. The Red Cross simply had too many volunteers -- millions of women nationwide wanted to help in some way. The solution was to have the great majority rolling bandages and knitting. It should be noted that the generous coverage of volunteer activities in the local newspapers did not include Mexican American women. They may have volunteered, but they were almost never mentioned in the El Paso Times or Herald Post, nor in the later Mabel Vaughn Kennedy’s master’s thesis on the El Paso home front.

**Traditional Women**

Although there was an assumption that women’s roles were significantly changed by World War II, most home-front historians agree that basic gender values did not change significantly. There continued to be support for traditional women’s roles. Mrs. Leverett


\(^528\) *El Paso Times*, 8 December 1943.

\(^529\) *El Paso Times*, 8 December 1943.
Saltonstall, wife of the governor of Massachusetts, summed up the view that women, in spite of the war, were still mothers above all: “Men’s work is fighting the battle; women’s is the task of keeping homes warm and true, of seeing that little children eat their oatmeal, that the elbows are patched and that they say their prayers.”

A Fortune Magazine writer was convinced that Americans held strong views about factory work for women. He explained that “many thoughtful citizens are seriously disturbed over the wisdom of bringing married women into the factories.” Of course, married women did indeed go into the factories, but rarely in El Paso. There was no extensive war industry, and the needed workers could be recruited from among Mexican American men. And when working women did enter unfamiliar territory, the emphasis was toward a temporary war effort, not to change female roles. El Paso middle and upper class women were still waited on by servants, even long after the war was over.

As Geoffrey Perry described 1936 America, “The upper third of the population was literally waited on by the other two-thirds.” Although in most of the country fulltime household servant disappeared, they remained part of middle class life in El Paso for another three decades and still exist today in Juarez.

There was a concerted effort to describe these at-home women as essential to the war effort. In an exhibitor’s guide to the movie Women at War, the heroine was described as “a good housewife, among the strongest, bravest and most valuable American women-at-arms. She’s the keeper of the Home, the thing we’re all fighting for. It is the patriotism practiced

530 Leila Rupp, Mobilizing Women for War, 139.


532 Geoffrey Perry, Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph, 355.
daily by these mothers who turned down the attraction of a man’s job to stay at home to do woman’s vital work.”\textsuperscript{533} There were many divided messages for women, but there was a continuing emphasis on domesticity and the traditional wife and mother. Stay-at-home women were assured that becoming proficient in first aid, home gardening, and nutrition helped the war effort. Most of all, “Morale is a woman’s business. Courage, serenity, and a gallant heart are feminine ways of saying we won’t be beaten.”\textsuperscript{534} Unknowingly, this glorification of domesticity resembled the Nazi feminine ideal of kinder, kuche, kirche (children, kitchen, church).

Although local newspapers reported on women at work, they devoted far more space to news of high society. In the \textit{El Paso Times}, two out of twelve pages were taken up with the comings and goings (literally) of the social elite. Readers were informed that Mr. X and his wife spent the weekend in Chihuahua, that Mrs. Y’s sister was visiting from Dallas, that the youngest Z child had a birthday party (with all the five-year-old guests listed). Except for the upper crust of Juarez, few Hispanic names graced the social columns. Flattering descriptions of wardrobes accompanied every major story. The women were variously described as “stunning in a black afternoon frock accentuated with a large embroidered floral design,” or “a smart gown of black and white accentuated with red and blue to match her ruby earrings and her turquoise turban with snood.”\textsuperscript{535} The women featured in the articles were usually depicted as soft-voiced, invariably pretty, with exquisite taste in clothes.

Georgia Lee Ann Anderson, the wife of Mayor John Edward Anderson, exemplified a traditional woman. The \textit{El Paso Times} described her as a Southerner with the complexion “of

\textsuperscript{533} Leila Rupp, \textit{Mobilizing Women for War}, 140.

\textsuperscript{534} \textit{El Paso Times}, 10 March 1943.

\textsuperscript{535} Ibid., 11 April 1945; 1 January, 29 May, 1944.
the texture of the magnolia of her native state.” Typically, the reader was assured that “she has exquisite taste in clothes which she wears with distinction.” Mrs. Anderson was so traditional “she called her husband ‘Mr. Anderson’ most of the time.” Even receptions that were ostensibly designed to encourage volunteerism, like Bundles for Britain, were replete with descriptions of a “lovely purple ensemble” or a “dress of a luscious watermelon red.” Surprisingly, readers still learned about visitors who stayed at local dude ranches, including Mrs. William Hawkins of Waterbury, Connecticut, and the Countess Juli Guertz from Austria. Whether or not women actively participated in war work, there were plenty of newspaper ads to extol ways for them to join the war effort. The El Paso Laundry Company urged women to send their clothes to the laundry and use that free time for war duties. One of its advertisements read, “Uncle Sam needs every minute that every person can spare in a maximum effort to bring the war to a speedy, victorious conclusion.” Women were assured that “the age-old art of needlework gains new significance as an aid to win the war.” This “war-winning” effort was to encourage women to crochet new hats and handbags and “put the money thus saved into War Bonds.” The Popular, the largest local department store, urged women to “make it your creed to look your loveliest every hour of the day. Morale on the home front is the woman’s job.” A local beauty shop claimed to that it would help women with their war work. How? “With Red Cross, Civilian Defense and other war work occupying her time, it is hard for the modern woman to find time to give her skin and hair the necessary care.” The Star Beauty Shop urged readers to “make an appointment right now” without explaining why beauty shop appointment


537 Ibid., 17 June 1943.

538 El Paso Herald Post, 1 February 1942; El Paso Times, 17 August 1942.
would free up any volunteer time.”

One reason that women followed a traditional pathway was that they began marrying and giving birth in ever increasing numbers. The formally accepted baby boomer years are 1946 to 1964, but the pro-natalist, family-centered American ideal already had begun during the war years. The demographic shift that became the postwar baby boom began in 1940, when the economy was finally recovering from the Depression. In 1939, the number of births was under 2.3 million. By 1943, the figure had already climbed to 2.9 million. During the official baby boom years, starting in 1946, the birthrate continued climbing to reach a peak of 4.3 million in 1957. D’Ann Campbell noted that families did not wait until war ended to begin their private version of child-centered families. Men and women not only married at a younger age during the war, but the marriage rate jumped by nearly 50 percent in 1946 and remained at least 20 percent higher through the end of the 1940s. Two out of three men returning from the war were still single, and they busily made up for lost time.

**Conclusion**

Studying women during wartime can enhance the historical perspective, especially the changes in social order and gender definitions. Along the border, there were many changes similar to those nationwide. Yet in El Paso there was no upsurge in factory jobs for women since the city lacked a strong war industry. Nonetheless, El Pasoans soon became used to lady

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539 *El Paso Times*, 1 August 1942; 8 July 1944; 10 March 1942; *El Paso Herald Post*, 17 May 1942.


truck drives, gas station attendants, and street car operators, jobs that had never before been open
to women. Women pilots flew out of Biggs Field, WACs were assigned to Fort Bliss, and female
physicians appeared on the scene. The addition of 40,000 young men meant an infusion of
prostitutes and “victory girls.” El Paso was the first city in the Southwest to open a Rapid
Treatment Center that was intended to treat venereal disease. Not surprisingly, there was no
such thing for men. Women remained blamed exclusively for the spread of VD. Traditional
social values still held sway, and the great majority of wives remained at home. Many women
followed traditional lifestyles because they were marrying and giving birth in increasing
numbers.

In short order, women’s postwar roles in El Paso and across America reverted to an old
pattern stressing home and hearth. As Maureen Honey noted, “They were no longer needed as
models of autonomy and achievement.” Even though women had taken on “male”
responsibilities, there seemed to be no long-term effect. And no feminist movement evolved to
preserve and expand wartime gains. We can speculate that the temporary nature of new roles in
wartime was one reason. Another may be that wartime changes were often undertaken in the
name of patriotism, not for individual gain. When the war was over, and patriotism needed no
longer to be invoked, social support for change evaporated. After the war, men could step
“back” into patriarchal roles. At the same time, women retreated, thereby maintaining gender
hierarchy. Few “men’s jobs” continued to be available to women. The “male jobs” in El Paso
-- newspaper reporters, taxi drivers, bus operators, sheet metal workers or truck drivers -- largely
disappeared for women. Although many women regretted losing wartime jobs and
responsibility, a majority seemed to welcome a peacetime that promised a return to traditional

542 Maureen Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda during World War II (Amherst,
MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 94.
ways of life. The “feminine mystique” became the role model for the next twenty years. But the memories of wartime activities seemed to have remained alive enough to help influence the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s and permanently change the role of women in America.
Chapter 5

Health on the Border

Disease knows no border

The state of health along the U.S.-Mexico border changed significantly during World War II. Wartime changes improved access to health care, revolutionized the treatment of venereal disease, and made a healthier diet accessible to many more people. In the 1930s the health status of Americans in general and of border residents specifically was very poor. A cogent example was a poverty-stricken Southside family described in a 1936 issue of Women’s Home Mission, a Presbyterian magazine. The father was a mason and managed to keep his job during the Depression. Yet his wages could not purchase enough food, let alone fresh vegetables and milk for the family. “It is impossible for the father to get even the bare necessities, the article related.” Fortunately, the wartime economy gave skilled laborers an income that could pay for essential food items. The years of the Depression meant inadequate food, limited access health care, and more vulnerability to diseases like tuberculosis, diarrhea, and enteritis. As Stephen Niblo relates in his book, Mexico in the 1940s, the usual state of any poor Mexican was to live in pain. There was much pain along the border.\[544\]

In El Paso, prewar communicable disease rates were far above national averages for


typhus, typhoid fever, whooping cough, and tuberculosis. The local rate of TB infection was more than three times the national average. There were high birth rates with attendant infant and maternal mortality. The *El Paso Herald Post* understood the extent of poverty in Southside and the resulting health problems. In general, the *Herald Post*, controlled by E.M. Pooley, a rambunctious editor who didn’t turn away from a fight, did not hide the mortality statistics. The *Herald Post* openly compared local death rates with those of Texas and the nation. El Paso ranked high in every communicable disease category. The more conservative *El Paso Times* remained primly mum on the subject. While the *Post* had an eight-paragraph story about El Paso’s death rates with state and national comparisons and details about each leading cause of death, the *Times* summarized the grim news in three paragraphs and mentioned no comparative statistics.\(^{545}\) El Paso leaders were sensitive about the extremely high communicable disease death rates, and some preferred not to mention them.

The health problems of poor children were indicative of the severe economic stress still lingering from the Depression. In a 1940 editorial, the *Herald Post* said, “To Anglo-American mothers it may seem a fantastic and most improbable statement that many a southside baby of the tenements is fed watermelon and beans. That should be enough to cause fatal illness from diarrhea and enteritis, even were the baby as robust as an infant Samson.\(^{546}\) Milk was too expensive, as many social and health workers knew. The nurses at the Freeman Clinic in Southside knew that lack of education was not the problem, but lack of money. For many years, the *El Paso Times* Milk Fund provided milk to poor babies. “But there can be 1600

\(^{545}\) *El Paso Herald Post* and *El Paso Times*, n.d. 1940, in the El Paso City-County Health District 1940 scrapbook.

babies on milk-feeding and yet that hardly makes an impression on the large baby population of those areas of the city in which the digestive diseases of infancy are most prevalent.” There were efforts made by well-meaning people to not ignore the health problems of El Paso’s poor. There were volunteers at the two baby clinics in Southside and two long-standing milk funds. The Rotarians contributed free eyeglasses for Southside children.

But well-intentioned activities produced only tiny improvements. Dr. J. Mott Rawlings, a local activist, led a many-year campaign to improve public health conditions in El Paso. At a 1940 Kiwanis meeting he reminded the audience that in 1938 El Paso County “led the country in typhoid fever” and cited six-year mortality statistics that showed El Paso children were at least twice as likely to die of many common illnesses as the average American child. Unlike some El Pasoans, Dr. Rawlings understood that the poverty on the south side of the tracks was a factor in the high death rates.

Counter intuitively though, health care improved, sometimes significantly, during the war. This was in spite of the fact that there were fewer physicians in the city, since about one-third of El Paso’s doctors were in military service. More available money was likely the biggest factor in health improvement. For the first time since the Depression most Americans could afford to eat a varied and healthier diet.

Wartime Health Statistics


Early in the war, public health officials assumed that there would be increasing health problems on the home front. Medical leaders worried that the decrease in numbers of doctors and other health workers would have all kinds of adverse effects on health in America. Further, there was a great movement of people from rural areas to cities and a large amount of growth near military bases. But nationally and locally there were not as many problems as anticipated. 

*Public Health Reports*, in August 1943, had unexpected good news: “During the first year of our participation [in World War II] the death rate for the U.S. was the lowest ever recorded.”

Dr. Irving Abell, chairman of the board of regents of the American College of Surgeons, delighted in saying that “the past two years have seen hospitals and doctors score a major triumph over disease and death under circumstances that in previous wars would have meant epidemics and rising mortality rates.” Health statistics showed a gratifying improvement. U.S. life expectancy actually increased by three years just from 1939 to 1945. During this period, both in El Paso and in the country as a whole, the death rate per thousand for infants under one year dropped more than one-third. As one historian noted, the infant death rate is a common index of public health standards and general economic conditions.

Although there was positive news about improving health conditions during the war, El Paso still suffered from some devastating statistics. Death rates for many diseases exceeded

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549 *Public Health Reports*, 58 (20 August 1943), 1,281-82.


national averages by two to five times. The worst death rates were for infants mortality from diarrhea and enteritis. In 1942, when this death rate for infants less than a year old was the lowest ever recorded in El Paso, it was still two and a half times that of the state and eight times the national rate [emphasis in the original]. The rate of infant mortality, as bad as it was, nonetheless dropped during the war. The rate of infant deaths dropped from 86 in 1939 to 61 per thousand births by 1944 -- an almost 30 percent decline. The general El Paso death rate reached an all-time low in 1944. But disparities between El Paso and the national rates were still striking. By the end of the war, although El Paso health statistics showed improvement, tuberculosis mortality continued to be more than twice as high as the national rate, influenza and pneumonia, 45 percent higher than nationally, and infant death rates still 5 and a half times higher. The increasing numbers of births attended by physicians may have been a factor. While in 1941, one-third of all births were attended by midwives, by 1944 midwives were present at only 15 percent of births. However, the problems of poverty still weighed heavily. Dr. J. Mott Rawlings did not cease his activist role. He was blunt about the high death rate in El Paso. It was “due to the conditions south of the tracks.”

Dr. Rawlings was clear that poverty on the Southside was a factor in the high death rates.

**Health and Money**

The greatest health problem was perhaps the lack of money -- personal funds,

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553 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health Unit, 1942, 34-36.

554 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health Unit, 1943.

555 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health Unit, 1944.


557 *El Paso Times*, n.d. 1943. From the El Paso City-County Health District 1943 newspaper scrapbook.
family money, government resources. Many people were unimaginably poor. During the Depression medical care was an undreamed of luxury for those who could scarcely buy enough food to survive. A young woman who became a war worker in Orange, Texas, described her life before wartime industry opened up job positions. She said that her underwear was made from flour sacks, her makeup was flour for face powder and moistened red crepe paper for lipstick. She washed her hair with lye soup.  

558 El Pasoan Rosa Guerrero remembered the joy of being able to use shampoo for the first time.  

559 When food, clothes, and shampoo were too expensive to buy, certainly health care was out of reach for thousands of people on the border. Later, health economists have observed that the first thousand dollars of disposable income made more of a difference in health care than any other factor.  

560 One might even say that for the period of the early 1940s the first hundred dollars of disposable income could effect that change.

The great public health changes that World War II brought to the border came about because there was increased personal income available. Once the war was underway, job rates shot up and pay packages were fuller. Health on the home front improved simply because people could afford to eat better and to pay for medical care. There was more government money available as well. The City-County Health Unit budget increased by 21 percent from 1943 to 1945. The federal government made more money available to both state and local health departments and poured funds into public health benefits like water treatment plants.

558 Louis Fairchild, They Called It the War Effort: Oral Histories from World War II Orange, Texas (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993).


Nationally and locally, soldiers and soldiers’ young families had access to government-paid health care, and many saw a doctor for the first time in their lives. All of these developments help explain the improvement in El Paso health care during the war.

Hospitals

El Paso had a number of very handsome medical buildings, most of which had been built as sanitariums for tuberculosis sufferers.\(^{561}\) In the war years, El Paso hospitals included the City-County Hospital, Newark, Southwestern General, Masonic, Hotel Dieu, and Providence hospitals.\(^{562}\) Most of these were private hospitals which did not accept non-paying patients. At the beginning of the war, scarcely anyone had health insurance. In 1940, only 9 percent of the national civilian population had hospital insurance.\(^{563}\) But great changes were coming; by 1950, 51 percent of people had some kind of health insurance.

The City-County Hospital was the only public hospital. It was staffed by low-paid doctors, volunteer physicians, and nurses whose highest pay was $90 a month.\(^{564}\) Like other hospitals all across the country, City-County Hospital was struggling to obtain enough staff. The night shift provided first aid but no medical emergency care. In July 1943, the hospital had no night orderlies or ambulance drivers. Nurses and maids, some of the latter being 15-year-old

\(^{561}\) Much of the early growth of El Paso included tuberculosis victims who flocked to the city. The belief was that a dry, mountainous climate was the most effective in treating the disease. By the 1940s, the sanitariums were being shut down; it had become clear that a mountainous climate was not a necessary factor in TB care.


\(^{564}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, 29 November 1942.
girls, were doing part of the orderlies’ work. While nurses annually received a maximum of $1,080, County officials, including the sheriff, tax collectors, the court clerk, and county judge received $5,500 a year. A rough indicator of dollar value is about twelve times current prices. Thus a nurse might earn the equivalent of $12,000 a year, while major County officials were paid at the present-day rate of $66,000 per annum. Other local hospitals paid a little more, but the average was just $100 a month.

Most local hospitals experienced shortages of nurses once the war broke out as women joined the armed services or left the city to follow their soldier husbands. According to the El Paso Times, there was another potent reason for the shortage of nurses—the lack of household help. “The girls can’t get maids to take care of their homes and children while they are working,” it claimed. Hotel Dieu Hospital, along with the City-County Hospital, were the only local institutions designated as Emergency Base Hospitals by the U.S. government. Only 13 hospitals in Texas had such a designation. More importantly, Hotel Dieu had the only nursing school in the area. Otherwise, the closest nursing schools were in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Amarillo, Texas. Nursing students enrolled for a three-year course. Total first-year tuition was $199.50, a considerable sum at the time; second and third years were far less expensive.

Newark, the smallest hospital in El Paso, with only 22 beds, concentrated on pregnant care

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565 El Paso Times, 14 July 1943.
566 Ibid., 29 November 1942.
567 El Paso Times, 25 September 1943. Note that in this era women were often referred to as “girls” no matter what their age.
568 El Paso Herald Post, 30 October 1943.
569 Hotel Dieu School of Nursing Fact Sheet 1945. El Paso Library Vertical File, Hospitals-Hotel Dieu.
and birthing in Southside El Paso. Birthing was not considered a hospital necessity at the time; women were still often attended at home by midwives. For example, in 1942, midwives attended 20 percent of all births in El Paso County. Nonetheless, the trend toward hospital birth was established and continued to grow. By 1944, 313 babies were born at the small hospital, performing a vital function for poor Hispanics. Although the City-County Hospital and Hotel Dieu also provided maternal care for South El Paso, the nearby and familiar Newark Hospital helped make modern care available in the barrio. Supported by the Methodist Church, the hospital was named in honor of the Newark, New Jersey, Conference of Methodist Women. All care was entirely by outside donation and small fees. Methodist women gave supplies for the babies: safety pins, diapers, soap, crib sheets, Bibles, and toys for the newborn. Maternity care included prenatal and postnatal checkups, the hospital delivery, and well-baby care, all for a fee of $25.00. That fee covered eight days in the hospital. In general, maternity stays during the 1940s were far longer than current births. At any hospital, eight to ten days was the expected time to spend as a maternity patient. 

Hospital care during the war years was hampered by the loss of trained personnel. All local hospitals lost nurses and doctors. About one-fourth of El Paso physicians were in military service. Despite the efforts of the City-County, Hotel Dieu, and Newark hospitals, many prospective patients went untreated. Although the military cared for all service members, most

570 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health District, 1942, 35.

571 Newark Hospital only accounted for 10 percent of El Paso’s 3,218 hospital births in that year. Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health District, 1944.


medical care was not paid for by the government or by private insurance. All the local civilian hospitals were dwarfed by the huge military installations. At the beginning of the war, the military hospitals were William Beaumont General Hospital and Fort Bliss Station Hospital. The Fort Bliss Hospital merged with Beaumont in July 1944. By 1945, Beaumont Hospital had an estimated capacity for 6,000 patients. Beaumont became the largest general hospital in the Army, and, so the El Paso Times claimed, it was “the largest hospital in the world.”574

World War II was the first war where America had more casualty deaths than deaths from illness. There were 355,000 military deaths from all causes and some 750,000 wounded during the war. When a wounded man arrived at a stateside hospital, there was only a two percent death rate.575 As the wounded arrived back in the states they were not necessarily sent to the hospital nearest their home. Rather, they were assigned according to their medical needs. Beaumont Hospital was the largest plastic surgery center in the country. It was also designed for eye surgery, neuropsychiatry, and deep radiation treatment.

Before the United States entered the war, William Beaumont Hospital was already being expanded, as the entire Army grew from only 270,000 men in 1939 to 1,500,000 by 1941. Three weeks before the United States entered the war, the El Paso Herald Post proclaimed the expansion of Beaumont Hospital to 977 beds. The newspaper reminded the readers that Dr. Beaumont was an army surgeon in the 1820s who had gained fame through his lengthy observation and care of a man who had been shot in the stomach. The wound could never be closed, and Beaumont was thus able to make a first-hand study of the human stomach.576 In


576 El Paso Herald Post, 17 November 1941.
1833, Beaumont published his *Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juices and the Physiology of Digestion*, “a revolutionary work in the field of medicine and one which brought the then-unrecognized American medical profession into foremost position.”

Another prewar expansion, in April 1941, was the establishment of a School for Medical Department technicians. Students were trained as medical, surgical, dental, pharmacy, laboratory, veterinary, and X-ray technicians. Although the United States would not declare war for another five months, clearly the Army was preparing for the eventuality, as these men were “given advanced training in branches of medicine applicable to battle and field service conditions.” By the end of the war, over 30,000 men had been trained in El Paso as lab technicians. Beaumont Hospital was not a single building. Before World War II started, the Fort Bliss hospital had 37 buildings with a 425-bed capacity. By 1945, the hospital had grown to 174 buildings. Local El Paso hospitals rose to the occasion as best they could, but William Beaumont Hospital was the shining example of providing needed care.

**Public Health**

The outbreak of World War II forced local health officials to think about the challenges that they would face during wartime. In January 1942, a month after the U.S. entered the war, the major concerns of the City-County Health Unit were a possible bombing by enemy forces and a recurrence of the World War I Spanish influenza epidemic that killed many more people than those facing enemy fire. Although some health professionals worried that a flu epidemic

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578 *El Paso Times*, 16 November 1941.

would do great harm, Director Dr. L.T. Cox felt certain that an influenza vaccine was imminent: “Don’t be surprised to read any day of an announcement that a discovery has been made to defeat influenza.”\textsuperscript{580} It turned out that there would be no threat from either enemy bombs or an influenza epidemic. Dr. Cox was off the mark about defeating the flu, but his remarks reflected the wartime optimism of Americans in general. Dr. Cox joined the Army in 1942 and was replaced by Dr. W.B. Porthro.\textsuperscript{581}

The Health Unit was in charge of many public health programs, including maternal and child health, disease control, tuberculosis and venereal disease control, laboratories, food and sanitation, and vital statistics. The number of these public health issues was challenging, but the greatest problem faced by local health officials was the lack of money to support their efforts. Local government only spent one-half of the minimum judged acceptable by national standards. Yet they tried to be as effective as possible given their limited budget and personnel. One of the responsibilities of the Health Unit was to provide maternal and child care to poor residents. About 25 percent of El Paso infants were cared for by the Unit. Similarly, about one-fourth of pre-school children were immunized by the Health Unit staff against smallpox, whooping cough, diphtheria, and typhoid. Prenatal care was available for as many as 1,000 women annually, but that was still only one-fifth of El Paso’s pregnant women. The number of hospital baby deliveries (as opposed to midwife care) increased from 44 percent in 1937 to an astonishing 68 percent by 1942. The Health Unit was determined to move toward hospital births for all babies. By 1944, there were still 26 registered midwives in El Paso, and there were likely many unlicensed women acting as midwives. “As soon as the present list is depleted, there are to be no

\textsuperscript{580} \textit{El Paso Times}, 22 January 1942.

\textsuperscript{581} Ibid., 8 June 1945.
more. But as a result of wartime and the shortage of doctors, those midwives already licensed have been permitted to carry on their work**582

The Health Unit’s nurses made thousands of home visits to children--some 16,000 in 1942. Furthermore, the district nurses held classes in health centers that reached 11,870 mothers and children in 1943.583 As the war continued, the Health Unit struggled, successfully by and large, to provide as many services as it had before the war, despite the difficulty in getting enough doctors, nurses and sanitarians. The Unit even added some new sections: school health, public health nursing, dental and veterinary divisions.584 But the annual reports almost never mentioned that the poverty-stricken patients they served were mostly of Mexican background nor did they ever say that half of El Paso’s population was Hispanic. A rare inference to Hispanic mothers was a caustic remark: “The Mexican race is a very prolific one and our problem in this section of the country definitely lies with these people.”585 Nonetheless, when Dr. Porthro resigned in June of 1945 he looked back with satisfaction on the work the Health Unit had been able to accomplish. “In spite of wartime conditions and shortages, El Paso has experienced the lowest death rate in the history of the community.”586 Although Dr. Porthro was proud of the lowered mortality rate, he knew well that El Paso health care revealed that local statistics were far worse than either the Texas or national averages.

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582 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health Unit, 1944, 14.
583 Annual Report of the El Paso City-County Health Unit, 1943, 16.
584 Ibid., 1944, 10,12,13,16.
585 Ibid., 1943, 16.
586 El Paso Health News, City-County Health Unit, June 1945.
Children’s Health

Children were much at risk in El Paso. Not only was the city the site of shockingly high infant mortality rates, but all children -- rich or poor -- could come down with diphtheria, typhoid, rheumatic fever, whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever, and meningitis. There were some vaccines available, but because of widespread poverty, many children were never inoculated. Poor nutrition was certainly a factor in children’s health. In February, 1945, a national Public Health Service physician conducted an inspection at Aoy School in South El Paso. The school served a six by seven block tenement area where there were 2,500 children. One hundred seventy-two children were found to have riboflavin and Vitamins A, C, and D deficiency. Although avitaminosis symptoms (which are from vitamin deficiencies that can come from many causes), there still seemed to be many indications of the poor state of the children’s nutrition. The children were not found deficient in riboflavin (because beans, a basic part of Mexican diets, is rich in all B-complex vitamins), but other indicators were serious. One hundred fifty-four of the children showed signs of rickets (a Vitamin D deficiency) and one hundred nineteen had puffy, red gums (thought to be a Vitamin C deficiency). The federal government provided some nutritional help; some children got Works Project Administration free lunches (150 at Aoy, for example), but the majority did not. Nearly 5,000, about one-fourth of the total enrollment of City and County schoolchildren received fruits and milk or lunches from the Surplus Commodities Administration. Poor nutrition was just one aspect of the health problems that plagued El Paso.

587 Pauline Kibbe, Latin Americans in Texas. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1946),44.
588 El Paso Herald Post, El Paso City-County Health Unit newspaper scrapbook, 1943.
**Water, Sewage, and Garbage Problems**

Potable water, sewage, and garbage problems added to the unhealthy picture. In 1940, El Paso treated raw sewage and removed 80 percent of the solids, but the effluent flowed untreated into the Rio Grande. Dr. S.H. Newman, president of the City-County Health Board, said it would be a “foolish expenditure of money to try to sterilize the effluent.” 589 Apparently there were many El Pasoans who would have preferred to ignore the dismal health statistics and to disregard the conditions that made El Paso a public health disaster for many. Dr. J.Mott Rawlings was noted for his fearless and frank campaign for improving health conditions. Rawlings said there were 500 open toilet pits in the city limits with no sewage connections. Furthermore, the water of the Rio Grande was contaminated by sewage from the disposal plant, and the open [meaning uncovered] Franklin Canal was being contaminated daily by dumping of garbage and “other things.” Rawlings also warned that “water from the river is taken out in the Lower Valley and used to irrigate vegetables which go on our tables.” 590

Sewage problems were not restricted to the river and local canals. In 1940, the *Herald Post* described a pool of sewage underneath a tenement building in South El Paso. The sewage was three to four feet deep in some places and covered an area of half a city block. The tenement was owned by owners in California and rented through local agents. The sanitary engineer for the City Health Department planned to ask the California owners that steps we take to make repairs. Apparently, the city planned to ask, but not insist, that the building be made

589 *El Paso Times*, 30 January 1940.

El Paso’s mayor was reluctant to spend more money from the municipal budget, and the city seemed incapable of enforcing health regulations.

Garbage cans were a periodic concern of both El Paso newspapers. A city ordinance required garbage cans to be covered. Each homeowner and business owner was responsible for buying and insuring that appropriate garbage cans were used. Apparently, many people did not comply. Worse yet, war restrictions meant that metal tops were no longer available. Dr. Porthro of the City-County Health Unit suggested using wooden barrels to alleviate the problem. Garbage collectors also complained about refuse strewn over streets and lots. The Mayor several times threatened court action against people who ignored Garbage Department regulations, but apparently to no avail. Perhaps in desperation, he appealed for volunteer cooperation in the cleanup. In one instance, grocery store owner Armen Wardy was told by health inspectors three times to correct his garbage disposal methods. His store’s garbage cans had no lids, thousands of maggots were present, and animal refuse from the grocery store was scattered around the yard. As he stood in Police Court, the judge commanded Wardy to “make some garbage lids from wood.” The lack of public cooperation thwarted city efforts to eliminate problems with garbage storage.

Animal control was also a health issue. Rabid dogs were reported every year, with city officials emphasizing that the ordinances against dogs running free would be rigidly enforced. But clearly they weren’t enforced, as the spate of newspaper articles attested.

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593 **El Paso Times**, April 1941. From the El Paso City-County Health District file, 1941 newspaper scrapbook.

1942, Mayor Anderson called upon El Pasoans to join together in a rat killing drive. A professional brought in estimated there were 150,000 rats and mice in El Paso. During rat killing week, housewives could get free packages of rat poison from the Health Unit, and businessmen could ask for free rat extermination service.

There were significantly greater problems than garbage lids and animal control. Sewage and potable water demands grew as the growing population of the city and Fort Bliss put more and more pressure on what had been a woefully inadequate system in pre-war El Paso. Air quality was yet another issue. The El Paso Times bemoaned in a headline, “No Cure Seen for Smoke Pall at Ball Games.” The city dump had been ordered not to burn trash when the semi-pro baseball team had a game scheduled. Yet in April 1941, the Dudley Field baseball game “had to be called in the fourth inning because of smoke.” Mayor J.E. Anderson had no solution. He said that it seemed probable that the city would have to continue the same trash burning program until city finances would permit the installation of a “suitable incinerator.”

But help was on its way. Urged on by the presence of Fort Bliss in El Paso, federal government money became available so that the city could expand sewage systems, pumping stations, and treatment plants. The exigencies of war pushed forward better water systems for El Paso. And the city was eager to apply for government help. Fort Bliss authorities told the mayor [on December 17, 1941, ten days after Pearl Harbor] “an adequate water supply must be assured before the government will commit itself to establishing Ft. Bliss as one of the nation’s major Army posts.” El Paso cooperated with the Army and received substantial building funds for water treatment plants. Indeed, Fort Bliss became one of the largest Army bases,

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595 El Paso Times, April 1941. From the El Paso City-County Health District File for 1941.

596 El Paso Herald Post, 17 December 1941.
expanding from 3,000 soldiers in 1939 to 40,000 in 1945, or close to a third of the city’s entire population.

Health Care on Both Sides of the Border

Under the pressures of World War II, the border population increased rapidly. Both the rapid expansion of Fort Bliss and the enlarged entertainment district in Juarez meant thousands of new people were pouring into both cities. While the military population would reach 40,000, the civilian population climbed too. In 1944, the estimated population for El Paso was 130,000. Military bases were developed or expanded in many border twin city areas, from San Diego to El Paso and Brownsville. And Mexican border cities received an influx of men seeking work as agricultural laborers in the U.S. The bracero program was established in 1942 as a wartime measure to make up for anticipated manpower shortfalls in the United States. There were many more laborers who wanted bracero work than could be accommodated (estimates as high as ten aspirantes for every slot), and many of the disappointed farm workers crowded into Mexican border towns. Thus on both sides of the border there was a tremendous buildup of a temporary population, especially of young men. The potential for disease breakout was seriously expanded.

Two completely different health care philosophies confronted each other at the U.S.-Mexico border. The Mexican Constitution of 1917 guaranteed the right to health care for Mexican citizens. Although the right was guaranteed, the actuality was very different. Mexico was too poor to provide adequate health care for its people. Government-sponsored public health care only began with the Second Six Year Plan (1940-1946) during the presidency
of Manuel Avila Camacho. The Mexico Social Security Institute (IMSS) was created in 1943 and was responsible for the health care of workers.\footnote{Michael G. Ellis, “The Economics of Health Care Along the U.S. Border,” 48.} On the U.S. side of the border, a fee-for-service medical system prevailed then and now. There was not a general philosophy that everyone in the United States was entitled to health care. The fee-for-service model set up contrary goals--profitability versus the wish to be part of the helping professions. Thus, people who could not afford to pay for medical care were usually not served by private physicians.

The most serious problem in Ciudad Juarez was the scarcity of potable water and the contamination of that which existed. Juarez City Engineer Frederico Esqueda pointed out that the grave risk of polluted water explained the “innumerable cases of infections and tremendous infant mortality.”\footnote{Alfonso Ruiz, ed. Celebrando Sesenta Anos de Compromiso por la Salud Fronteriza . El Paso: Organisacion Panamericana de la Salud (2003): 44,45.} In February 1942, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (later the Pan American Health Organization, or PAHO) opened a field office in El Paso.\footnote{The Pan American Sanitary Commission was established in 1902 with the aim of stimulating “the mutual interchange of information that would be of value in improving the public health and combating the diseases of humankind.” In the American Journal of Public Health, September 1930, Vol. 20, No. 9: 925.} “Initially, its mission was to control syphilis and gonorrhea.”\footnote{Marco Cuento, The Value of Health: A History of the Pan American Health Organization (Washington2007), 7} That same month El Paso public health physician Dr. Joseph Spoto and Juarez’s Dr. Porfirio Lozano traveled to Mexico City to discuss future collaboration. Three months later, eight Mexican public health physicians came to the United States to learn the latest techniques in the antivenereal field. Two laboratories were set up in Juarez and in Nuevo Laredo to test for syphilis (and later for tuberculosis and leprosy).\footnote{El Continental, 19 February, 1942; El Paso Times, 18 May, 1942.} At a celebratory dinner in May, 1942, with local dignitaries from both sides of the border, Dr.
Spoto eulogized, “We are gathered here to commemorate the initiation of an important program in international cooperative health. I believe tonight cements further relations between this country and Mexico. I believe we have gone a little further than joining in arms to fight our enemies. We are joined to fight our biological enemies.”

Health officials from the U.S. and Mexico recognized the potential benefits from binational cooperation on mutual health problems. In June 1943, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau organized a meeting in El Paso and in Ciudad Juarez to discuss border health problems. This first meeting took on major importance. Dr. Hugh Cumming, retired U.S. Surgeon General and then director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau of Washington, D.C., attended. Mexican dignitaries included Dr. Victor Fernandez, national director of the Mexican health department, Juarez Mayor Antonio Bermudez, and Chihuahua Governor Alfredo Chavez. This first binational meeting concentrated on controlling venereal disease and tuberculosis, the major concerns on both sides of the border. Curiously, Dr. Cumming, who headed PAHO, with membership throughout Latin America, said, “I am not the most firm believer in all internationalism, but I do believe that there should be international sanitary legislation.”

Dr. Edward Ernst, Assistant U.S. Surgeon General, hastened to say, “International public health agreements are not political, and are not controversial. Such agreements, I believe, form the real basis for good neighborliness.”

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602 El Paso Times, 16 May 1942.

603 El Paso Herald Post, 8 June 1943.

604 Dr. Cumming was appointed to the U.S. Public Health Service in 1894 and had been director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau since 1920; he may have been out of touch with changes influenced by World War II.

605 El Paso Herald Post, 14 June 1943. The Pan American Sanitary Bureau was founded in 1902 to promote public health cooperation in twenty-one countries in Latin America.
Following these meetings, the participants created the United States-Mexico Border Health Association. A *Herald Post* editorial lauded the conference for opening up understanding and cooperation all along the border. “Borders the world over have long been known to be below par in health standards,” and the newspaper supported the organization of the new Border Public Health Association.  

The idea was to create an organization that would facilitate informal exchanges between the two countries. As Humberto Alvarez Romero so eloquently put it, “At a time when many borders were erased by ambition and the will to dominate and were being converted into fields of destruction, in the border area between Mexico and the United States, the bases of an understanding were being laid.”

The Association delegates agreed to establish a permanent office along the border and to hold conferences in one of the border cities every year. The second annual Border Public Health conference began on May 309, 1944. Like the year before, the major issues remained venereal disease (delicately called “social disease” in many newspaper articles) and tuberculosis; several speakers voiced the familiar blaming of the spread of venereal disease on prostitutes. Dr. Howard E. Smith mulled over the high mortality of tuberculosis among Latin Americans. “It is impossible to determine what part racial susceptibility plays. There is a general impression that this race is quite susceptible [to tuberculosis] more so than the Anglo-American race.”

Nonetheless, there was an ongoing effort to deal with health problems exacerbated by the rapidly growing population on both sides of the border. The association could point to growing membership, with officers from Chihuahua City, Sonora, Juarez, and Southern California.

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The Border Health Association met the next year from May 14 to May 16, 1945 -- just seven days after peace was declared in Europe. As in the previous two years, their goal was to improve health for “men, women, and children on both sides of the border.” Association officials announced that marked improvement had already been noted in health conditions along the border. Major officials from Washington, D.C. and Mexico City made up the roster of speakers. Surgeon General Thomas Parran sent effusive praise for the sacrifice of home front doctors and health authorities: “They have held the line since America entered the war, against very great odds. Many have worked themselves to death doing the work of two or three persons. Their work has contributed greatly to the absence of epidemics usually associated with major wars.” The *Herald Post* reported that the Border Health conference created better conditions on both sides of “this great undefeated border.” Dr. Parran reminded the conference participants that disease is not halted by political borders. He said he “was astounded” to learn that more than sixteen million persons cross the U.S./Mexico border annually. “Obviously you cannot quarantine disease when that number are involved,” he declared.

Although the conference continued to discuss problems and progress in dealing with venereal disease and tuberculosis, for the first time the conference also looked at important conditions of children’s health. Postwar planning had obviously gotten underway.

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**Venereal Disease**

609 Ibid., May 14, 1945.


Venereal disease has always been a concern in wartime, both in combat areas and on the home front. In late 1941, Dr. L. T. Cox, then medical director of the City-County Health Unit, reported that there were 87 men infected with venereal disease for every one thousand soldiers. But gonorrhea and especially syphilis rates seem to be unreliable. Rates can differ astonishingly and it is difficult to ascertain how accurate they are. For example, the *El Paso Herald Post* in March 1942 trumpeted, “Venereal Disease Among Bliss Soldiers Shows Sharp Decrease.” The article claimed that “venereal disease among local troops had dropped from 87 per thousand in November 1941 to 41 per thousand in January [1942].” At the end of 1943, the soldier “social disease rate” had further dropped to 27 per thousand. However, local physician Dr. Rawlings warned against complacency, pointing out that the “improved” venereal disease rate was still twice the national average. By November 1944, the *El Paso Times* reported that the Army VD rate had dropped to a low of 23 per thousand. A year later the *Times* triumphantly reported that overall infections among El Paso-area military reached the unlikely all-time low of 11 per thousand as opposed to approximately 35 a year before.\(^{612}\)

Statistics reported by the Department of the Army Office of the Surgeon General after the war painted a less rosy picture. According to the office, the incidence (total cases acquired after induction) and rates (per 1,000 per annum) were still high at war’s end. The Army statistics showed a total of 464,969 cases of gonorrhea from 1942 to 1945 among troops based in the continental United States. The rate per 1,000 ranged from 23.91 in 1943 to a high of 43.21 in 1945. For syphilis, there were a total of 230,405 cases, with a low of 7.19 in 1942, and a high of 20.04 per 1,000 in 1945.\(^{613}\) In other words, the Army found that rates tended to get worse as


the war went on, especially after penicillin was distributed to the troops. Before penicillin became available, Dr. Joseph Spoto of PAHO calculated that venereal disease cost the U.S. Army five million man-days a year. Fifty thousand selectees were rejected because of syphilis, a number equal to four divisions.614

Syphilis and gonorrhea were hardly just wartime diseases. But the coming of war brought millions of young men together, away from home and closer to sexual temptation. Gonorrhea afflicted more men than syphilis, but the ravages of syphilis got more attention because it was the more serious disease. Dr. Parran, head of the U.S. Public Health Service, said in 1938, “We are paying for syphilis now, whether we control it or not. We are paying for it in our relief rolls; we are paying for it in our institutions for the crippled, the blind, and the insane.”615 Dr. Parran wrote these words five years before penicillin wrought its magic and reduced the potentially horrifying effects of the disease.

The public health issues concerning venereal disease changed significantly from 1943 to 1944. Penicillin brought the potential of dramatically altering the threat of debilitating venereal disease. Penicillin was first made available to American troops in late 1943 and would be used in the U.S. domestic market by mid-1944. The El Paso Times touted the virtues of the new miracle drug. On June 1, 1944, the Times breathlessly announced that in El Paso almost miraculously cures of gonorrhea have been achieved by the world’s new “wonder drug,” penicillin. The article went on to explain that the treatment of syphilis, which formerly required more than a year’s time, could now be cured by penicillin in seven to ten days. Furthermore, the

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614 El Paso Times, 16 May 1942.


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newspaper proudly announced that El Paso had been reported as having “the best venereal disease control program in the United States.” But one year later VD rates were climbing again. Although health officials lauded the new wonder drug, they were unprepared for the spiking percentage of soldiers with VD. The rapid increase in venereal disease records kept by every regiment signaled that “even the most cautious of soldiers were tempted to abandon the ‘bright shield of continence’ now that they knew that health and honor would be restored by the magic bullet of penicillin.” Ironically, once penicillin became readily available, the rate of VD rose. *The Nation* magazine explained that “The knowledge of the new swift and sure treatment has encouraged sexual promiscuity and carelessness in the use of prophylactic safeguards.”

Venereal disease was one of the greatest health concerns along the U.S.-Mexico border. It was exacerbated by the growing number of U.S. military stationed near the border. With so many young men there came young women. Leaders on both sides of the border took a number of steps, including the Pan American Sanitary Bureau’s emphasis on venereal disease. In June 1942, perhaps with persuasion from U.S. officials, the municipal leaders in Juarez decided to shut down its legal area of prostitution, the *Zona de Tolerancia.* El Paso had closed its red-light district a year earlier. El Paso’s original zones of tolerance existed from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and in modified form until 1941.

Local authorities

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616 *El Paso Times*, 1 June 1944.


618 *The Nation*, 22 June 1945.

619 *El Continental*, 20 June, 1942.

stated that their campaign against prostitution was based on European experience. “European nations, advanced in culture and human civilization, arrived at the conclusion that the zones of tolerance, established since time immemorial, were useless for controlling venereal disease, explained one local official.”621

At the time, there were two major ideas about how to prevent, or at least lessen, venereal disease. Health officials assumed that prostitutes were the overwhelming source of the disease. One school of thought held that since prostitution was inevitable, it was better to regulate sex for sale. Both El Paso and Juarez had had red light districts where prostitutes were allowed to function and were supposed to be examined every week to ensure that they didn’t have venereal disease. U.S. officials estimated that the average prostitute in a brothel would usually accommodate six customers per hour, or about 50 per day, for a total of 350 a week. Therefore, if she contracted a venereal disease immediately after her weekly examination, she could infect 350 men before the disease was discovered.622 This approach assumed that venereal disease was a female problem, an attitude that the armed services and much of the public fully shared. “Boys will be boys,” was the prevailing attitude. The concern was for men to avoid sexual disease while at the same time blaming women for the spread of VD.

The second school of thought assumed that prostitution should be suppressed and not allowed to exist at all. This was the philosophy of the U.S. War Department, but not necessarily adhered to by many military or local officials. To strengthen enforcement, Congress passed a bill on July 31, 1941, four months before the U.S. became a World War II participant but when military bases were rapidly being built up. Officially known as the May


622 John Boyd Coates, ed. Preventive Medicine in World War II, 286. These estimated numbers of men served by one prostitute seem to be excessive, even in wartime.
Act, it was introduced by Congressman Andrew J. May, chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs. The May Act was designed to “prohibit prostitution within such reasonable distance of military establishments as the Secretary of War should determine to be needful to the efficiency, health, and welfare of the Army.” In the later implementation of this policy, the Army adherent to the suppression of prostitution took a drastic step. Although Fort Bliss soldiers had free access to Juarez throughout most of the war, at the end of January 1944, the Fort Bliss commander banned almost all soldiers from crossing the border. A State Department employee reported that a military order limited to one percent the number of enlisted men permitted to cross the border; of course this seriously affected business in Juarez. After some hasty scrambling, the orders were rescinded within two weeks. Then later in 1944, Consul General William Blocker reported that Fort Bliss authorities issued an order early in June to place Juarez off limits for all military personnel because of vice conditions. The Governor of Chihuahua (who was also the brother of the Juarez mayor) hastened to the border to deal with the American complaints about conditions in Juarez. He must have been successful. By the end of August, Blocker could report that “the order recently issued by U.S. military authorities forbidding American soldiers to visit Ciudad Juarez has been canceled.”

Although the Army officially endorsed the call for abstinence, more realistic officers looked for ways to reduce, not eliminate, the risk of VD. There were constant efforts to provide activities meant to dissuade soldiers from looking for sexual opportunities. Athletics, movies, and “wholesome” entertainment were meant to take the place of at-risk sexuality. Other efforts

623 Summary of Conditions during February 1944, sent 22 March 1944 from W.K. Ailshie, Second Secretary 812.00/52367. National Archives, College Park, MD.

624 Summary of Conditions, 17 July 1944, 812.00/7-1744; Summary of Political Conditions fir August, 13 September 1944 812.00/9-1344. National Archives, College Park, MD.
by the military to curb venereal disease included dozens of film clips and posters. These posters did not mince words. For instance, one about using condoms headlined, “Put It On Before You Put It In.” The Army pragmatically distributed prophylaxis, both condoms and treatment. They set up Pro Stations to provide treatment after sexual intercourse. The Army popularized its motto, “If you can’t say no, take a pro.” For 10 cents, soldiers could buy a kit that contained three condoms and some lubricating jelly.

An extensive Army research project about promiscuity and the number of VD causalities overseas was conducted in early 1945. More than eight out of ten servicemen surveyed admitted to regular sexual intercourse. An army medical officer estimated that 70 percent of men were sexually active, another 15 percent of men were sexually promiscuous, and 15 percent would be restrained by moral or sanitary considerations. In general, the U.S. Army was more concerned about lost man-hours than the social or moral implications of sexual activities. Until penicillin was available to the troops in the fall of 1943, treatment of gonorrhea and especially syphilis was a lengthy and uncomfortable procedure, thereby reducing manpower numbers. Perhaps because of the size of the military in El Paso, there were several major studies conducted in El Paso about venereal disease. They included a paper for the Conference of Morale Officers in February 1941; a 1942 article in the Journal of Social Hygiene, a 1942 epidemiological study on the “Sources of the Venereal Diseases among Military Personnel in the El Paso Area,” a 1943 report in the Rapid Treatment Center, and a 1944 Report on Repression Programs in El Paso,

625 Television Channel 58, 7:45 p.m., 8 November, 2002.

626 War Department Pamphlet No. 21-25, RG 215 Office of Community War Services, Social Protection Division, National Archives, College Park, MD.

627 Allan Brandt, No Magic Bullet, 164.

628 John Costello, Virtue Under Fire, 94.
Texas.⁶²⁹ Although the earlier studies assumed that prostitutes were the source of V.D., studies later in the war recognized the changing mores which meant that young women from many background could be sexually active.

By the end of the war the assumption was that the majority of venereal disease exposure across the country did come from “amateurs,” also referred to as “good-time girls, khaki wackies, victory girls, and good-time Charlottes.”⁶³⁰ According to a Colonel Sternberg, fully 90 percent of venereal disease in the armed forces was traceable to these amateurs.⁶³¹ Nonetheless, the early war years saw a concentration on prostitution as the source of VD.  The Army and American society in general did not anticipate the significant social changes in sexual behavior that war brought about in the U.S.  A prewar conference of Morale Officers in February 1941, concluded that despite some improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of syphilis and gonorrhea, a much better approach was prevention.  Prevention meant the medical programs of prophylaxis, but the emphasis was equally concerned with the control of prostitution and the “provision of adequate recreational facilities for military naval, and industrial personnel.”⁶³²

The Army created Morale Sections whose function was to provide recreational facilities within Army camps.  The suggestion “by responsible officers” was to aim for a major effort to


make available athletics and supervised contact with young women at service clubs. In these early war years, some Army officers seemed to have great faith that recreational facilities staffed by proper young women in uniform would diminish sexual activities and thus decrease venereal disease. The Morale Officers believed that “wholesome female company” was a major element of disease control.

The Community War Services Social Protection Division sponsored two major VD studies in El Paso and Juarez. The first was conducted by Bascon Johnson, a physician with the U.S. Public Health Service, in March and April 1941. This was before the entry of the U.S. into the war but at a time that the Army was expanding rapidly. A shorter version of this study was submitted to Community War Services. Another report by the Social Protection Division, entitled “Report of Repression Program in El Paso, Texas,” was issued in October 1944. The study discovered that fewer soldiers developed infections after exposure in Juarez. The author suggested that “if a soldier is exposed in Juarez, he is more likely to take a prophylactic and hence one finds less venereal disease.

Conclusion

World War II developments unquestionably improved the health of American border residents—more income, more access to medical care, new water treatment plants, new drugs like penicillin all combined to raise the level of health along the border. In Mexico, the 1943

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633 “Summary of Statements on Control of Venereal Disease” Office of Community War Services, Social Protection Division RG 215-43, Box 6, National Archives, College Park, MD

634 Community War Services Social Protection Division, RG 215, Box 2, 17 October 1944. National Archives, College Park, MD.
founding of the Secretaria de Salubridad y Asistencia led to a national network of hospitals and a widespread immunization program. The Pan American Sanitary Bureau (later the Pan American Health Organization) opened a field office in El Paso in 1942. The aim was to concentrate on binational border health problems like venereal disease and tuberculosis. In El Paso, more money in peoples’ pockets meant that private doctors and hospitals became more accessible. Soldiers at Fort Bliss were eligible for complete medical care, and if they were among the third of soldiers who were married, their wives and children could have prenatal and child care. The astonishing growth of health insurance (from 9 percent having access in 1940 to 51 percent of the country by 1950) brought affordable medical care to half of the population.

On the border, the health status of residents reflected both change and continuity. Certainly, there were significant improvements in border health brought about by World War II. But as much as there was good news about improved health, the border continued to struggle with widespread poverty and inadequate care for much of its population. Although El Paso health statistics showed improvement, the death rates were still significantly greater than national averages. The worst example was the infant mortality rates from diarrhea and enteritis which stood at eight time the national average. Public health statistics remained woefully inadequate compared to most of the rest of the country.
**Conclusion**

This dissertation has examined border history during World War II. This home front study has looked at the U.S.-Mexican border from the social history perspectives of gender, race and ethnicity, and class structure. Border studies can give us a window into a number of issues with global impact. They include first world/third world relations, immigration, assimilation and acculturation. All of this can be studied in microcosm in borderlands history. On the U.S.-Mexico border, the asymmetrical power and money of the U.S. always shaped the
borderlands -- before, during, and after the war.

The historical debate about the World War II home front evolved over the years. The theme of continuity versus change and the role of unity or disunity examined how the home front reacted to the enormity of wartime events. Early postwar history of the 1970s emphasized the “Good War” and described the home front in mostly laudatory terms, emphasizing change that painted a picture of a country joining together as one. Even much more recent works like those of Ken Burn and Tim Brokaw reprise this theme. The 1980s home front studies tended to be more nuanced. Studs Terkel asked if it was indeed a Good War. The 1980s also saw a marked change in women’s history, using gender as a unit of analysis. Many authors were swift to engage in examining American women during World War II. In 1981, Karen Anderson wrote the first major book on the subject, followed by many others. Most of these writers shared her view that continuity, rather than change, prevailed. Margaret and Patrice Higonnet powerfully summarized their conviction that despite women being able to “move forward” in work and social policy the “male battleground took economic and cultural priority. Thus power relationships of dominance and subordination remained the same.” By the 1990s, many writers recognized the complexity of World War II and questioned whether the home front had


been such an idyllic part of American history. There was an acknowledgement that the treatment of minorities and the clashes between labor and management could not be easily described as a golden era. Since 2000, the World War II home front continues to be a subject of many books, especially the experiences of Mexican Americans. One of the major studies was Richard Griswold del Castillo’s *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights.*

Home front studies continued to reprise the theme of a positive response to the U.S. participation in the war. As William O’Neill argued, “Americans could be proud of themselves, not only for winning the war but, by and large, for the way in which they won it.”

On the border, there were some astonishing examples of unity. The relationship between El Paso and Juarez had never before or since reached the closeness of World War II. It could have been a closed border for security. Yet it was the opposite, an open border with fluid relationships most of the time. Sometimes soldiers were not allowed to cross into Juarez, but that was not a local decision but a national one. Political and military leaders on both sides of the border constantly shared social events and activities. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of El Pasoans and Juarenses participated in mutual celebrations of national holidays. Union members on both sides of the border jointly celebrated Labor Day festivities with thousands of participants. But this exceptional unity between El Paso and Juarez was not reflected throughout Mexico. Although Mexico was actively a part of the war effort, providing vast quantities of raw materials to the allies, the interior of the country was not enthusiastic about the war and was sometimes even hostile. It was a question of the border influencing national policy, not the other way around. The periphery had the best relations between the two countries.

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Disunity also existed in this time of tumultuous change. Labor battles occurred across the country, and despite non-strike pledges by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), there were often wildcat strikes. The U.S. Congress turned away from many left-wing ideals by mid-war. Racism continued to play an important part in ethnic and racial strife. Anti-Hispanic riots in Los Angeles and anti-black riots in Detroit were major examples of unrest. Disunity on the border was reflected in the struggles of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill) to overcome the wage differential between Anglos and Mexicans. Local politics continued to be run virtually exclusively by Anglos who also controlled the “Mexican vote.”

It can be argued that the strongest debate on the World War II home front was the degree of change and the enduring continuity. Change was manifested in many ways. Mexico gained power and influence as the country sent northward vast quantities of needed strategic materials, including copper, lead, zinc, mercury, rubber, oil, and agricultural products. Despite having fewer doctors and nurses on the home front, health improved, at least partly because good health is not solely dependent on medical care. Higher wartime wages brought the opportunities for better nutrition, and federal funds influenced public health and helped develop cleaner water supplies. The most significant medical changes were the discovery and distribution of penicillin. Although millions of women had new work possibilities during the war, much of that faded as the soldiers returned from war looking for jobs. The wartime experience of Mexican Americans sometimes meant new jobs and education, but it was only the beginning of the eventual dismantlement of “Jim Crow” for Hispanics.

El Paso very much reflected a dichotomy between change and continuity. Among workers, the most significant labor contests were organized by the Mine-Mill union. During the
war, the CIO had a liberal stance that was amply reflected in the Mine-Mill activities in El Paso. While the union fought for change, non-union workers continued to struggle with the cheap labor policies of local business and agriculture. Farm workers, in particular, saw scarcely any improvement in their wages even as prices rose during the war. It could be argued that the possibilities for Mexican Americans reflected change, but at first only in the military.

Raymond Telles, a decorated captain in the wartime army, eventually became mayor of El Paso in 1957 with the strong backing of veteranos. Local women did not go to work in great numbers, at least partly because El Paso was classified as having an adequate labor supply or even a moderate labor surplus. But there were still many local women who enthusiastically took on “male jobs,” whether they became truck drivers, newspaper reporters, or bank clerks. A few even became wartime pilots. But the classical jobs of secretary, nurse, and teacher also remained low-salaried. All three earned about the same amount, roughly $1,000 annually.

Health status in El Paso reflected both change and continuity. For some, improved income meant better access to health care. Certainly it could mean a better diet. And like Americans across the country, penicillin became a true miracle drug. However, better health care was often not available to the poor who made up at least one-third of El Paso’s population. The city’s health statistics remained dismal compared to national and even state averages.

Locally, the postwar social relations with Juárez disappeared rapidly. On the labor front, Mine-Mill gained more power after their successful 1946 strike. Wartime jobs for women in El Paso, like bus operators, taxi drivers, or newspaper reporters, receded. For Mexican Americans on the border, the postwar era began some changes, especially for those who could take advantage of the G.I. Bill to go back to school, or were eligible for loans to buy a home or start a business. Doctors and nurses came home, and Beaumont Hospital expanded to an astounding
six thousands beds El Paso health statistics improved but disease and death rates were still far higher than national rates.

Despite the changes brought about by the world war, continuity was also very much a part of postwar life. Women took up familiar roles again, partly because of the returning veterans and partly because of a dramatic rise in marriages and births. Historians question whether World War II had a lasting effect on women’s roles, especially since significant change did not come about the late 1960s. Labor unions were initially successful after the war, but the Taft Hartley Act of 1947 curtailed union activities. The leftwing Mine-Mill union was expelled from the CIO in 1950. By 1967, Mine-Mill no longer existed as a separate union. Mexican wartime relations with the United Sates helped enable the country to continue to industrialize and expand urban areas. Nonetheless, the economic and political power of Mexico was always subordinate to that of the U.S. Most of all, the white male power structure remained solidly in place for more than a decade. The elite men of El Paso and elsewhere fondly thought of their world as a democracy, but there were many flaws in that democracy, especially when viewed from other than elite male leadership. Socially, politically, and economically, there were many restraints for those outside the charmed circle.
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Biographical Sketch

Winifred B. Dowling was born at West Point, New York. She is the daughter of Alice Brough Baumer and Major General William H. Baumer. She graduated from the Sorbonne, University of Paris, France with a Diploma of French Studies, with honors. She attended American University in Washington DC and received a Master’s degree in Sociology from the University of Texas at El Paso. As a doctoral candidate, she worked full-time as Aging Services Administrator for the City of El Paso. Her publications include Guide to El Paso and a chapter in Handbook on Women and Aging, published by the Greenwood Press. She has been author or co-author of six journal articles, including one in French. She is the author of numerous magazine and newspaper articles, book reviews, and brochures on voluntarism, aging, health and history. She has testified before the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. She has widely spoken at state, regional, national, and international conferences, including speeches in Japan, Mexico, Hungary, The Netherlands, as well as Geneva, Switzerland, and Montreal, Quebec (both in French). She has taught six classes on aging issues at El Paso Community College and three American History classes at UTEP. She has presented chapter subjects from her dissertation at history conferences in New Mexico and Arizona. She has been nominated to the UTEP Distinguished Service to the University, Student Award; the Chancellor’s Outstanding Teaching Award; and the Faculty Achievement Award for Research. She is currently chair of OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) at UTEP, originally initiated by President Diana Natalicio.

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