

Mexican Americans and World War II

World War II had an enormous impact on Latinos in the United States, including Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans were drafted into or volunteered for the U.S. armed services, where they had the highest percentage of Congressional Medal of Honor winners of any minority in the United States.

The war also fueled Latino migration to the United States. As defense industries grew and many workers went off to war, industries experienced acute labor shortages. Women and African Americans entered industry in large numbers to help address these shortages, and temporary workers from Puerto Rico and Mexico, or *braceros*, were through the Bracero Program, a 1942 labor agreement between the United States and Mexico.

Although the Bracero Program brought Mexicans to the United States to work primarily in agriculture, some workers were also employed in various industries. Over 100,000 contracts were signed between 1943 and 1945 to recruit and transport Mexican workers to the United States for employment on the railroads. By early 1945, the *bracero* population in the Philadelphia area numbered approximately 1,000, most of whom worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Living in substandard conditions in “box car camps,” the laborers had little contact with the general population and limited access to healthcare, recreation, translators, or legal aid.

In September 1945, Philadelphia's International Institute (an immigrant aid organization now known as the Nationalities Services Center) formed the Philadelphia Regional Committee of Mexican War Workers to support these railroad workers and address some of the difficulties they faced. The committee helped with weekly English classes, recreational activities, shopping, and problems ranging from contract disputes. It organized sports events and day trips, and Sunday evening *fiestas* that drew up to 200 guests and featured traditional music and food.



Bracero workers reading Pennsylvania Railroad safety manuals, 1944.

The Committee was often called upon to mediate contract disputes. A particularly controversial subject was the automatic deductions made from the men's paychecks for food, health insurance, and retirement benefits. Mexican workers were wary of representatives from the Pennsylvania Railroad. As one case worker reported, “one sensed constantly an antagonism to the railroad people.”

Since most war-related job opportunities existed in urban centers, there was considerable migration of Mexican Americans to the cities in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. In Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona there was a large exodus of the population to the urban centers. California had the largest population increase, giving it a Mexican-American population equal to that of Texas.

One of the most serious incidents of discrimination occurred during World War II in the Zoot-Suit Riots of Los Angeles. The incident received its name from the type of clothing, known as a "zoot suit," worn by many young Mexican Americans of the early 1940s. In the summer of 1943, a dispute between a Mexican American and an Anglo erupted into widespread rioting. Anglo members of the armed forces were soon joined by civilians in a spree of attacking and beating Mexican Americans wherever they were found.

With the end of the war and the return of troops from overseas, the railroad workers were required to return to Mexico (many Puerto Ricans, who were citizens, decided to remain).

Serving or working abroad, or moving to a large city expanded the horizons of a generation of Mexican Americans. Like many African Americans, they had sacrificed for their adopted country, they began to want more of the American Dream: better education, better jobs, and an end to racism and discrimination. They considered themselves as Americans and wanted their full civil rights. Many decided to change the system in which they were reared.

The termination of the war also brought into being the "G.I. Bill." This act provided veterans with opportunities for employment, high school and college education, job training, and resources for purchasing homes and life insurance. Many Mexican Americans took advantage of the G.I. Bill. For the first time, they entered college in large numbers. Within a few years after the war, their slightly higher educational achievements would lead to greater opportunities.

Reading Questions:

Sources: "A History of the Mexican American People," by Julian Samora and Patricia Vandell Simon, <http://www.jsri.msu.edu/museum/pubs/MexAmHist/chapter16.html>; Maria Möller, "Philadelphia's Mexican War Workers," *Pennsylvania Legacies*, November 2003, Vol. 3 (2), 16.