

# 3 Mexican Americans in the United States

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It is hard to imagine what the United States would be like today without the 17 million Americans whose heritage is Mexican. Mexican Americans form one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States. They are also one of the oldest. Nearly one and a half million Americans today can trace their heritage back to Mexicans living in the U.S. Southwest before 1848.

The Mexican American heritage is alive and thriving today. We can see it in the hundreds of fine old buildings that were once missions in the American Southwest. Many towns, cities, states, rivers, and mountains in the United States have Spanish names. These places are home not only to people of Mexican ancestry, but also to people whose ancestors came from all parts of the globe.

The largest populations of Mexican Americans are in California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. There are also large Mexican American communities in Illinois, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington State. To give you some idea of the importance of Mexican Americans, consider this: the number of Mexican Americans living in the city of Los Angeles is larger than the number of Mexicans living in any city except for Mexico City.

## What's in a Name?

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What does the term *Mexican American* mean? A Mexican American is any citizen of the United States whose ancestors were born in Mexico.

As you have read, many Mexican Americans have ancestors who lived in the southwestern states long before this area was part of the United States. However, more than 10 million Mexican Americans have ancestors who moved to the United States from Mexico. Many Mexicans came to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1911.

You will read about the Mexican Revolution and one of its greatest heroes, Emiliano Zapata, in Case Study 3.

## The Roots of La Raza

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People often mix up the terms *Mexicans* and *Mexican Americans*. They don't realize that there is a difference between the two. Mexicans are citizens of the nation of Mexico. Mexican Americans are citizens of the United States who have a Mexican heritage.

Americans with Mexican ancestors do not all agree on what to call themselves. Some people in New Mexico refer to themselves as *Nuevo Americanos* or *Hispanos*. In Texas, the term *Tejanos* is often used. Many young Mexican Americans in California and Arizona use the term *Chicano* as a badge of pride. No matter what they call themselves, most Mexican Americans consider themselves to be part of *La Raza*, a Spanish word meaning "the race." This term expresses a feeling of community spirit which unites people of Mexican heritage.

Mexican Americans are part of a larger group of people known as **Latinos**. Latinos are American citizens whose roots lie in Spanish-speaking lands south of the United States. These lands include Mexico, the nations of Central and South America, and many islands in the Caribbean Sea.

The term *Anglo* originally meant Americans whose ancestors were from England. Today, the term is sometimes used to describe Americans whose background is from anywhere in Europe except Spain. In this book, we use the term *Anglo* in this way.

## 1 Home on California's Ranches

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Mexican families who had lived in California before it became part of the United States were known as **Californios**. Many were descended from original Spanish settlers, and they lived on **ranchos**. Ranchos were ranches, or huge estates on which the Californios raised large herds of cattle.

The children of wealthy Californios often had private tutors who educated them and taught them other skills. Many children became expert dancers, musicians, and writers.

As the years passed, the Californios came to see themselves as different from Mexicans. California was removed from the outside world. It seemed to many Californios that their prosperous way of life would go on forever.

## **In the Borderlands**

In 1845, Mexico was a young country. It had been independent from Spain for only 24 years. California, or Alta California as it was called, was a distant province of Mexico.

As far back as 1521, Spanish settlers had brought the first cattle to the Americas. More than 300 years later, most Californios were raising cattle and sending the hides to factories in Boston. There, the hides were made into shoes. The trade in cattle hides brought much wealth to the Californios.

Wealthy Californios enjoyed a way of life that was cultured and privileged. However, most Mexicans in the region were poor. While Californios were sending their children to Mexico City or Europe for an education, most people in Alta California could neither read nor write. They lived in poverty on ranches or in poor villages.

When the poor compared their lives with those of the wealthy, they often felt great resentment. During the 1830s and 1840s, the poor staged a number of uprisings against the ranches and other settlements in California.

Though the wealthy Californios called on the government in Mexico City to send help, it did not come. The central government considered California to be too far away to waste troops on. The Californios themselves put down the uprisings, often with great force.

To Mexican government officials, California was the "borderlands"—a faraway frontier area of little importance. Thus, the Californios could not rely on the government when they most needed its help. On the other hand, the remoteness gave the Californios a good deal of independence from Mexican rule. The Californios became used to governing themselves without Mexican interference.

## **The Mexican American War**

After years of paying little attention to California, the Mexican government suddenly became concerned about this faraway territory in the mid 1840s. The increased migration, or movement, of Americans to California alarmed the government.

"California is entirely at the mercy of the North Americans," stated a Mexico City newspaper in 1845.

The concerns of the Mexicans were well founded. The United States had already annexed, or taken over, Texas in 1845. Texas had won its independence in 1836. After independence, it applied to join the United States as a new state. After some debate, Congress admitted Texas as the nation's 28th state.

Many Mexicans predicted that U.S. ambitions would not stop with Texas. They worried that the United States would try to seize California and New Mexico, as well.

The prediction came true. Under the leadership of U.S. President James Polk, the United States declared war on Mexico on May 13, 1846. The aim of the war was to expand U.S. borders so that the country would stretch from the Atlantic ocean to the Pacific ocean.

The United States called this policy **manifest destiny**. The policy was based on the American belief that the United States had a manifest, or clear and obvious, destiny to grow westward.

What the Americans saw as destiny, the Mexicans saw as land theft. The Mexicans believed that the war was part of an American plan to steal land from a smaller country.

The Mexican American War lasted for almost two years. Finally, on February 2, 1848, the two countries signed a treaty in the town of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, outside Mexico City. The treaty ended the war.

## **The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo**

With a stroke of the pen, Mexico lost about half its territory in the treaty. The United States acquired the territories that now form the states of Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and half of Colorado and New Mexico.

The treaty offered U.S. citizenship to those Mexicans who wanted it. It gave people a year to decide if they wanted to retain their

Mexican citizenship or become U.S. citizens. Whether or not they became U.S. citizens would not affect their rights. They could remain in the United States no matter what they decided to do. The treaty also promised that the United States would fully protect the property rights of Mexicans who stayed in California after the war, whether or not they chose to become U.S. citizens.

However, as you will read, the treaty was not enforced. Anglo, or white Americans, treated the Californios as foreigners. Even those who had chosen to become citizens of the United States were treated as outsiders.

## **Gold! Gold! Gold!**

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Marshall and Sutter tried to keep the news from spreading. They hoped to gain all the riches for themselves. However, once the news was out, it proved impossible to contain it. As soon as one of the cook's children heard the story, he told his parents, who told another worker. The news of the gold discovery spread like wildfire.

When news of the discovery reached San Francisco, newspapers ran enormous headlines. Bakers left bread baking in the oven and teachers walked out of classrooms to rush to the gold fields.

Quickly, the news spread eastward to the rest of the United States and southward into Mexico. Soon, thousands of Americans and Mexicans had arrived in California. Each one had his or her own special dream of striking it rich. Gold fever seized the world. Soldiers and sailors deserted their posts by the hundreds to rush to California. People in South America, China, Australia, and Europe joined the rush. The population of California exploded from 15,000 in 1848 to 260,000 only four years later.

## **Cooperation—At First**

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As they arrived in California to make their fortunes, many newcomers from the East discovered to their horror that they knew almost nothing about mining. On the other hand, many of the Californios and new arrivals from Mexico were experienced miners. Mexicans had been mining silver and gold for several hundred years.

At first, Californios and the recent arrivals from Mexico helped Anglos and others learn to pan for gold. **Placer mining**, finding gold by washing soil and gravel, was difficult work, and

it required experience. The Mexican miners taught the Anglo miners how to use a batea, a flat-bottom pan, which filtered out the water and dirt and left the large pebbles.

In the beginning, gold was plentiful, and it was relatively easy to pick gold nuggets from river beds. In these first days, there was a sense of cooperation between miners.

That cooperation soon vanished. After the big nuggets were taken, it became harder to find gold. Naturally, the more experienced Californios and Mexicans were more successful at panning gold from streams. This success made the Anglo miners angry. Bloody fights often broke out between Anglo and Mexican miners. With the tide of migration bringing new miners from the East to California every day, the Anglos soon outnumbered the Mexican and Californio miners.

## **Foreigners Do Not Have the Right to Mine**

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As digging for gold became more difficult, the competition grew fierce. The Anglo miners became suspicious of "foreigners." They argued that these "foreigners" should not be allowed to "steal" a precious national resource like gold. To them, foreigners included Californios. They ignored the fact that the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo had given citizenship to Californios and others. In their greed, these Anglos vowed to drive out all the "foreigners."

## **A Tax on Foreigners**

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Californios and Mexicans soon became targets of much discrimination. Anti-foreign posters began to appear in mining towns. In 1850, the California Assembly asked the U.S. Congress to bar all foreigners, including Californios, from the mines.

In May 1850, the California state legislature passed a foreign miners' tax law. This law placed a special tax of \$16 a month on all foreigners. Included among the foreigners were the Californios. Even though the law was not strictly enforced, it threatened to bankrupt any miners but the Anglos.

Later in 1850, there were outbreaks of mob violence against Californios and foreigners. As a result, many Californios and foreigners left the gold fields. The foreigners could at least return home. To the Californios, California *was*

home. They had nowhere else to go.

Violence against Mexicans became widespread. One Mexican woman was captured by an angry mob in the town of Downieville. It was never clear if she had actually committed a crime. There was only a rumor that she had stabbed an Anglo who had broken into her home. Based on that report, she was immediately arrested, tried, and hanged in front of a mob of 1,000 people.

As the violence increased, Mexicans fought back. Joaquín Murieta came to California during the Gold Rush. His exploits in the next few years are part truth and part legend. It is impossible today to separate the truth from the legend. Murieta supposedly turned to crime after miners killed his wife.

In Calaveras County, Joaquín Murieta's name caused such fear among Anglos that any Mexican who looked like him was considered dangerous. For Latino people, however, Murieta was considered a hero because he rebelled against the injustices committed by Anglo miners.

### 3 The Struggle Over Land

Most people who came to California in search of gold did not find it. Many went broke trying to make their fortunes. Most left the gold fields but stayed in the state.

Having given up on the idea of finding gold, some Anglos decided to become ranchers or farmers. However, they did not own any land in California. The land the Anglos wanted belonged to the Californios.

As you have read, the vast majority of the Mexican American population in California did not own any land. Rather, land ownership rested in the hands of a few wealthy families. One such family was the Vallejo family.

### Taking the Land

Before the Mexican American War, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo was one of the wealthiest Californios. He owned more than 200,000 acres of land in Sonoma Valley. A wealthy and cultured Californio, he had welcomed the Anglos during the war and offered them hospitality. But after the Gold Rush, the new Californians forgot his

hospitality. His land became a target for Anglos who wanted it for themselves.

Many Anglos resented the fact that wealthy Californios owned large ranches. The Anglos wanted that land for their own use. Some became **squatters**, illegal occupants, on the ranches owned by Californios. In an effort to drive Vallejo and other Californios off their own land, Anglos burned their crops, shot their cattle, and tore down their buildings.

The Anglos demanded that the huge ranches be divided into smaller plots that could be distributed to Anglos. They did not understand that large tracts of land were necessary to support a herd of cattle in California's dry climate.

Anglo squatters did not treat Vallejo and other Californios with much respect. They ignored the parts of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that granted legal and property rights to Californios. Instead, Anglos acted as if all the lands of California were theirs by right of conquest.

There was much confusion regarding ownership of land. In the past, when the United States had taken over other territories, the government had granted land to new settlers. Many Anglos who settled in California were expecting a similar offer.

### Proving They Owned the Land

Some of the problems Californios faced were due to differences between the Mexican and American laws of land ownership. U.S. laws required that land titles and land surveys be precisely laid out and perfectly accurate.

To the Americans, the records established under Mexican rule seemed sketchy. In Mexico's legal system, land ownership was based largely on how long the farmer had occupied and used the land. Boundaries were often not precisely drawn out. Land could be sold by verbal agreement. There was often no need to record sales officially.

Because of these differences, Californios generally had trouble proving that they owned the land. Many Anglo squatters filed lawsuits, hoping to use the American legal system to take land away from the Californios. Californios found that under U.S. law, their land could be taken away even though they had lived on that land for many generations.



Squatters found support from state senator William M. Gwin. In 1851, he proposed a new California law that created the Board of Land Commission. This law required that all landowners appear before the board to prove their titles. This violated the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which had guaranteed Californios ownership of their land. Suddenly, Californios had to prove that they owned their land.

This development gave confidence to squatters. They could remain in occupied lands, hoping that the rightful Californio owners would not be able to prove their titles. In effect, Californio landowners were considered to be liars until they could prove that they really owned the land.

## **Legal Battles Won and Lost**

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It took some Californios more than 17 years to establish their titles through the legal system. Even when they won, they lost—either because the process cost them their entire savings or because squatters destroyed their land.

Vallejo fought for his property rights. However, his legal battles were time-consuming and costly. Vallejo finally won his land claim after appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court. However, squatters refused to move from his land and destroyed his crops.

Vallejo's brother managed to prove his land claim before the Land Commission after paying his lawyers \$80,000. Penniless, he finally sold his property and moved to San Francisco.

In the end, neither the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo nor the legal battles were enough to protect the property rights of the Californios. In the long run, control of the best farming lands of California passed largely into the hands of Anglos.

## **A New Culture Emerges**

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By the end of the Gold Rush, Californios had seen their rights and property taken away. Many Californio families were forced to leave

California after losing their land. Many felt that they had become foreigners in their own land. Others stayed, such as Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. He later served as a state senator after California became a state.

The Gold Rush had drastically changed the population of California. The new Californians were mostly young and male. Only one out of every 12 newcomers was a woman. The number of women would not come close to the number of men until the year 1900.