

Mario T. García. *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) xii, 315 pp. \$23.00.

Mario T. García's *Desert Immigrants* documents and analyzes the growth of the border city of El Paso, Texas. The transformation of El Paso from a small crossroads community between Mexico and the U.S. to a major commercial and industrial metropolis is presented in terms of "the growth of American industrial capitalism and its need for new sources of cheap and manageable labor." García's attention to the economic underpinnings of El Paso's growth is well developed and he integrates many types of historical information. Business and labor statistics, demographic figures and newspaper accounts of day-to-day life in the city show the impact of immigration upon the border town.

García's thesis that U.S. business interests encouraged immigration from Mexico in order to obtain a cheap, exploitable pool of labor is clear. Once in the United States, Mexican workers were segregated in various barrios (neighborhoods) in El Paso, manipulated by hiring policies and various political agencies and denied many opportunities to better their position in society. Dual wage scales for white and Mexican workers, strike-busting and the threat of deportation were used to keep Mexicans in their place. Garcia shows how events in both Mexico and the United States encouraged immigration. The development of the cattle industry, railroads, the need for metals in the United States, and the Revolution in Mexico were powerful incentives. *Desert Immigrants* illustrates how the history of El Paso is a microcosm of relations between the United States and Mexico.

Garcia draws parallels between the experiences of Mexican immigrants and other ethnic groups. The complex nature of the region, however, means that the "border" is more than an arbitrary line which divides two countries. The history of El Paso shows how provisional the border is and how easily such a concept can be used as a political expedient. One area that might have been clarified more in García's valuable and well-written study is the concept of "border." In early El Paso, people on both sides paid little attention to national boundaries. The region developed as a hybrid of nations but U.S. interests put up stronger barriers between peoples in order to serve their own needs.

The idea of a "border region" which is an expression of both Mexican and North American cultures is important because it tempers García's hypothesis that El Paso's Mexicans tolerated economic, political and social injustice "because they believed they would remain in the United States for only a brief period." Certainly there were Mexicans who wanted to return to Mexico when the aftershocks of the Revolution eased. But this point should not detract

attention from the fact that many Mexicans became part of a border culture in which national allegiance was not important until U.S. interests felt threatened by large numbers of Mexicans. The danger of portraying all Mexicans as merely a temporary workforce is that some readers may extend the generalization to Chicanos (U.S. citizens of Mexican descent). The reasoning might follow that if Chicanos do not fare well in the U.S. it is because their sense of national loyalty is confused. Garcia makes another point which needs to be emphasized in order to correct such an impression, i.e., Mexicans adapted to harsh and sometimes brutal treatment in the U.S. because they were working hard to make a life there.

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