

In the 1930s, we illegally deported 600,000 U.S. citizens because they had Mexican heritage. By Laura Smith



Relatives and friends wave goodbye to a train carrying 1,500 persons being expelled from Los Angeles back to Mexico on August 20, 1931. (NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images)

In downtown Los Angeles during the 1930s, La Placita Catholic church was a social hub for Mexican Americans and immigrants. Immigration agents were well aware of this fact. On February 26th, 1931, they sealed off the area around the church before anyone could realize what was happening and began arresting suspected undocumented immigrants en masse. Families watched in horror as their spouses, friends, and colleagues — 400 people in total — were loaded into vans, and eventually shipped back to Mexico. Many of those detained had been in the country so long they didn't speak Spanish. One man, who had legal status and had his papers on him, tried to intervene. An agent took his papers and made him join the detained. The raid took an hour and fifteen minutes. The mass arrest was meant to send a message: We're coming for all of you.

Across the country, in California, Ohio, New York, Illinois, and many other places, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants were rounded up from public places, and summarily deported. The Depression had created a hunger for easy scapegoats. "A frenzy of anti-Mexican sentiment" was roiling across the country. In an effort to get rid of Mexicans as quick as possible, immigration agents could not be bothered to differentiate between those who had entered the country legally and those who had not. As Kevin R. Johnson explains in his legal review of the event, "It is clear today that the conduct of federal, state, and local officials in the campaign violated the legal rights of the persons repatriated, as well as persons of Mexican ancestry." When people protested that the raids were unfairly targeting people of Mexican descent, the man in charge of the raids, W.F. Watkins objected, saying that three "Orientals" and two Europeans had also been arrested. In total, roughly one million people of Mexican ancestry were deported during that decade — about a third of the country's Mexican population. Though immigration law is famously byzantine, it is crystal clear on one issue: U.S. born citizens cannot be deported for any reason. But during this mass Mexican deportation, sixty percent of

the deportees were U.S. citizens, mostly children who were in fact born in the United States. Because of the speed and recklessness, this mass deportation was actually more of an “ethnic cleansing,” Johnson says, not because the deportees were murdered, but because they were disproportionately targeted, rounded up, and purged because of their race.

Before the Depression, the U.S. had been in uneasy collaboration with Mexican workers, sometimes wanting their labor and other times wanting them out of the country. In the 1920s agri-businessmen lobbied to keep them in, arguing that the industry would fall apart without them.

As Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez explain in their book *Decade of Betrayal*, the change in policy was largely attributable to William N. Doak, who transformed the tiny, unknown Immigration and Naturalization Services into the bureaucratic behemoth we know it as today. Doak “instigated a personal vendetta to get rid of the Mexicans,” they write. For the Mexican community, it was a betrayal of trust – especially the U.S. citizens and those with legal status. Without warning, a switch had been flipped. They had been told that they were safe, that this was their country, only to have that safety unceremoniously and haphazardly revoked because there was a new white man in office. Mexican news outlets condemned the deportations, and the Mexican government announced plans to deport roughly 7,000 Americans who had overstayed their visas in Mexico in response.

Many of the people who were deported to Mexico, either had never been there, or hadn’t been there in so long that they had no connections and were forced to rebuild a life from scratch in an unfamiliar place. “Where is Mexico?” one five-year-old American-citizen said when his father told them of their impending deportation. In 2003, Jose Lopez, a U.S. citizen who had been removed to Michoacan when he was five, testified before the California legislature, “Living conditions in Mexico were horrible, we lived in utter poverty. My family ate only tortillas and beans for a long time. Sometimes only one meal a day.” Not long after, both of his parents were dead.

For those who were not deported, the uncertainty of their position was haunting. When would the immigration agents come again? Could they go shopping, to church, or school? One woman described how during this period, her grandfather, terrified of removal despite being a U.S. citizen, never went anywhere, even the corner grocery store, without his passport. When his granddaughter asked him why, he said, “Mija, I am just an Indian from Chiapas and they will deport me if they stop me and I don’t have my papers.” When he died, she buried him with his passport in his pocket.

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