



Photo by Elsa Medina

# Views from South of the Río Bravo

## Migration to the United States as a Field of Inquiry

(Part One)

Barbara A. Driscoll\*

However simplistic an observation it may seem, international migration is *ipso facto* a bilateral process that encompasses both sending and receiving countries in a web of inter-related social, political and economic processes and phenomena. Mexican migration to the United States is most patently no exception. Spanning the greater part of the twentieth century, and arising from factors in both countries, Mexican migration stands as a particularly significant development for understanding the economic development of the United States and the border region it shares with Mexico and constitutes one of the principal migratory movements of the twentieth century.

Mexican immigration has attracted significant scholarly attention in the United States since the turn of the twentieth century, some of it quite good. Victor Clark, Carey MacWilliams and Paul S. Taylor number among the earliest U.S. academic researchers, although others have produced biased and often less useful research. It was not until the 1970s, however, that Mexican immigration became a principal focus of a generation of U.S. scholars representing many disciplines, methodologies and perspectives. Particularly significant is the research produced by the first cohorts of Mexican American scholars trained in the 1960s and 1970s who bring a unique point of view to the study of immigration from Mexico.

Nonetheless, before the 1970s, Mexican immigration and immigrants received scant attention in Mexican universities. First, the

extremely centralized Mexican government, from its vantage point in Mexico City's Federal District, did not assign much importance to the border. Moreover, Mexican immigration northward did not generate much interest in cities since it was basically rural in origin until the 1980s, and jobs in the United States seemed to alleviate problems of unemployment and underemployment endemic in many sending areas, such as Jalisco and Zacatecas. In addition, Mexican immigrants residing in the United States traditionally sent money home (as they still do), thereby contributing substantially to local economies.<sup>1</sup> Funding to finance field research among Mexican immigrants in the United States was not widely available in Mexico until the 1970s.

This is the first part of a two article series that addresses major directions in Mex-

\* Researcher at CISAN.

ican academic research on immigration over the past 30 years: this first installment summarizes major research from the early 1970s to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The official end of the bracero program<sup>2</sup> in 1965 at the insistence of the Mexican government symbolized the heightened awareness in Mexico of the myriad abuses and problems associated with legal and undocumented immigration north. Substandard treatment and very low wages, particularly of undocumented Mexican workers, attracted the attention and ire of many observers in the United States, resulting in nationally circulated reports and documentaries. This reinforced and broadened intensifying concern in Mexico about extending protection to undocumented Mexican immigrants that would eventually motivate much early research about immigration.

True, renowned anthropologist Manuel Gamio received grants from the Social Science Research Council to do field work in the United States in the 1920s among Mexican immigrants, and his publications, available in both English and Spanish, represent an auspicious beginning of academic research based in Mexico. Both his overview of Mexican immigration and compilation of oral histories of migrants still constitute important sources of data.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, Roberto "Cuba" Jones was commissioned by the Pan American Union to undertake a study of the bracero program during its first years, 1942-1944. Although an American researcher, he later settled in Cuernavaca, Mexico. His monograph "Mexican War Workers in the United States" was published simultaneously in English and

first-hand information about the wartime bracero program.<sup>4</sup> After World War II, Edmundo Flores, now a distinguished researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) studied the bracero program for a master's degree in sociology in Wisconsin and devised an analysis that portended the very critical position that many scholars would assume much later toward temporary contract labor programs. Although Flores devoted a relatively short research time to studying Mexican immigration, his approach opened a new avenue toward understanding the significance of the bracero program.

During the height of the bracero program, theses<sup>5</sup> began to appear about various aspects of immigration. In 1954, Mario Ojeda, who went on to write extensively about U.S.-Mexican relations and serve as the president of the Mexican College, wrote a *licenciatura* thesis about the diplomatic protection of Mexican immigrants, a concept crucial for understanding the relationship between consulates and Mexican nationals in the United States. In 1964, Gloria Vargas y Campos wrote a *licenciatura* thesis about the bracero program.

#### THE 1970s

However, several factors converged in the 1970s to spur research in Mexico about immigration, in the process establishing it as a priority for academic researchers. The termination of the bracero program in 1964 unexpectedly exacerbated undocumented migration to the United States, which increasingly responded to intense demands in some U.S. regions and industries for Mexican immigrants. The growing presence of undocumented Mexican

immigrants in the United States became not just a legal problem, but an internal political one that required responses. Throughout the early 1970s, the U.S. Congress held hearings to consider the size and implications of the undocumented Mexican immigration community for the United States. Not surprisingly, undocumented immigration from Mexico became a pivotal issue for the burgeoning Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Indeed, the pioneering work of Mexican sociologist Jorge Bustamante in the early and mid-1970s provided the impetus for further scholarly studies in Mexico that focused on undocumented immigration to the United States not exclusively within the parameters of traditional sociological and migration theory but within a paradigm that balanced push factors in Mexico with pull factors in the United States, similar to what we call today, a binational labor market. Although Bustamante had already published in academic journals in the United States and France and had contributed to the highly acclaimed *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story*<sup>6</sup> with Julian Samora and Gilbert Cárdenas, he launched his research in Mexico at the Mexican College with a working paper entitled "Espaldas mojadas: Materia prima para la expansión del capital norteamericano" (Wetbacks: Raw Material for the Expansion of U.S. Capital) published in 1975 by the Center for Sociological Studies of that institution. Bustamante has since researched and published extensively in Mexico and many other countries on undocumented migration, the maquiladora industry and other aspects of the border region, the Mexican American community, and, also founded

the Northern Border College in Tijuana, Baja California. His work has been pivotal in opening public debate in Mexico about the importance of migration and the border, and indeed his research is a point of departure not just for academic research in Mexico but in the United States as well.

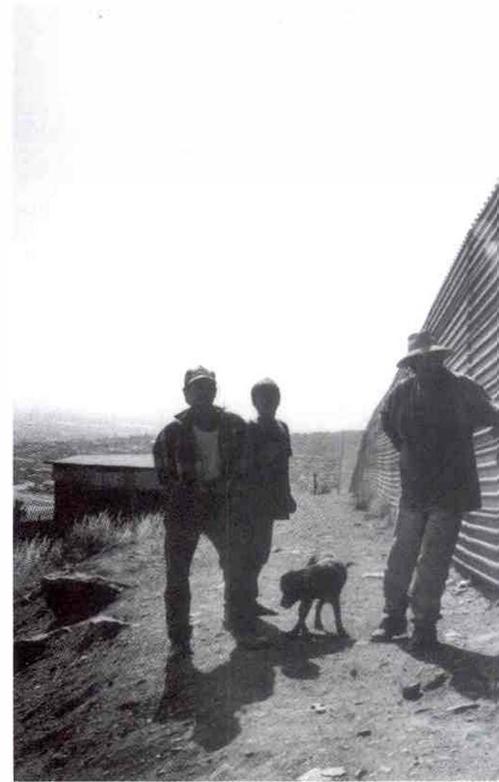
In 1979, the Mexican College's International Studies Center published *Indocumentados: Mitos y realidades* (The Undocumented: Myths and Realities), a compilation of presentations from a conference about undocumented migration. Bustamante was the only Mexican researcher who actually wrote about immigration for the publication, although demographer Francisco Alba offered an analysis of international migration as the failure of Mexican employment programs. All other co-authors were from the United States.

However, two books appeared in Mexico in 1982 about immigration. Mónica Vereá Campos (the founding director of CISAN) published *Entre México y Estados Unidos: los indocumentados* (Between Mexico and the United States: Undocumented Migrants), in which she provides an extensive overview of undocumented immigration and explains its consequences for the economies of both countries, showing that it had become a political problem for the United States and for Mexico. Around the same time, journalist Patricia Morales published *Indocumentados mexicanos* (The Mexican Undocumented Migrants), a study that addresses not just undocumented immigration, but explains the larger historical context of undocumented migration, especially the bracero program and the evolution of U.S. immigration policy. Finally, in 1991, the UNAM published a doctoral thesis in

law, *Migración de trabajadores mexicanos indocumentados a los Estados Unidos* (Migration of Mexican Undocumented Workers to the United States) by lawyer María de los Angeles Gastélum Gaxiola, that focuses on the dilemma of immigrants in the United States as a product of internal politics and compares it to European migration policy, using in part interviews she conducted among deported Mexican immigrants at the border.

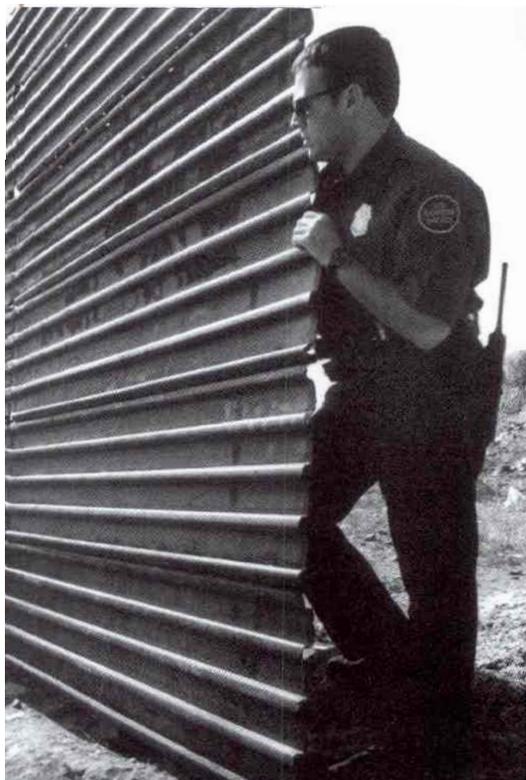
Parallel to research about contemporary migration issues, some significant historical studies have been published. In 1974, *Los mexicanos que devolvió la crisis, 1929-1932* (The Mexicans the Depression Sent Back, 1929-1932) written by Mercedes Carrera de Velasco clearly documented the processes of forced repatriation that many Mexican immigrants, both legal and undocumented, suffered in the early years of the Great Depression. Although subsequent research has been published in both Mexico and the United States about the effects of the Depression on Mexican immigrants, Carrera de Velasco's widely recognized work continues as a basic point of departure for this particularly difficult topic.

In 1985, the magazine *Historia Mexicana* (Mexican History) published an article by Camille Guerin-Gonzales about the process of voluntary repatriation through the historical experiences of families as an option exercised to maximize binational networks. In the same year, the Northern Border College published a monograph entitled "El programa de braceros ferroviarios" (The Railroad Bracero Program) by Barbara Driscoll about the railroad segment of the bracero program during World War II. In 1990, Remedios Gómez Arnau published with CISAN a historical



study of the concept of diplomatic protection used by Mexican consuls in their diplomatic activities on behalf of Mexican immigrants in the United States, *México y la protección de sus nacionales en Estados Unidos* (Mexico and the Protection of Its Nationals in the United States)

Threatened changes in U.S. immigration policy through the 1970s and the 1980s that finally culminated in the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) generated a variety of responses in Mexico. The journal of the Mexico College's International Studies Center, *Foro Internacional* (International Forum), for example, dedicated one issue to immigration, that included Mexican scholars Francisco Alba, Gerardo Bueno, Jesús Lamayo, Gustavo Verduzco, Mónica Vereá Campos and Samuel I. del Villar. For many years, the same center also published anthologies about the state of Mexican-U.S. relations that included specific articles about immigration.



The bitter domestic politics in the United States revolving around the issue of undocumented Mexican immigrants that emerged after the end of the bracero program in the mid-1960s made it patently clear that Mexico would have to develop alternative sources of information and data to be able to present alternative perspectives on migration in international fora. It was during this time that we saw the first data bases and large-scale surveys in Mexico that over the last 25 years have provided primary data regarding immigration. The Ministry of the Interior's National Population Council and the National Institute of Geography, Statistics and Data Processing (INEGI) have taken the lead, although other government agencies have participated. The Northern Border College has also created significant data bases about diverse aspects of migration, at times using innovative techniques (such as taking photos at the border cross points). This development of extensive primary data banks allows Mex-

ican researchers to propose analyses that can differ from those based on U.S. data.

Finally, I would like to mention a trend in immigration research that became particularly significant in Mexico in the 1980s, that of emphasizing the regional origins of the immigrants. As is well documented, some Mexican states send more immigrants than others, and those regional governments have increasingly become aware of the implications for their planning and development. The Michoacán College has organized many significant studies about migration from that state. For example, *La casa dividida: un estudio de caso sobre la migración a Estados Unidos en un pueblo michoacano* (A House Divided: A Case Study on Migration to the United States in a Michoacán Town) by Gustavo López Castro utilizes local historical archives and other resources to focus on the consequences of long-term permanent and temporary migration for local villages. We also find similar studies in other migrant sending states such as Jalisco, Zacatecas and Guanajuato, among others.

Academic research published in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s about many aspects of immigration conducted by an increasingly varied group of professionals has provided a firm basis for continuing investigation into what is a particularly complicated dilemma for both countries. Not only was this scholarship based on primary and secondary sources from the United States, but national and international funding enabled academic and government researchers to generate data in Mexico that would provide the vision that only a migrant-sending society can provide. If, indeed, Mexican immigration to the United States is a process that involves the sending as well as the receiv-

ing country, then research in Mexico is absolutely essential to developing a fully comprehensive analysis of what Mexican immigration is, and how it affects its participants and their families and communities. These two decades witnessed the first large-scale academic efforts in Mexico to study the phenomenon in a meaningful context. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My analysis of Mexican scholarship concerning immigration began with an article developed for an international congress on U.S. studies. "Migración a Estados Unidos: su visión desde México." *Estados Unidos desde América Latina. Sociedad, política y cultura* Víctor A. Arnaga Weiss and Ana Rosa Suárez Arguello, comps. (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, El Colegio de México and Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 1995) pp. 362-382.

<sup>2</sup> The bracero program was a formal temporary contract labor program negotiated by Mexico and the United States during 1942-1943 that recruited unskilled laborers in Mexico for agricultural and later railroad work. The railroad portion ended with World War II, but the agricultural segment lasted until the 1960s. The bracero program has justifiably received much criticism in both countries for many reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Gamio's work is widely available in a 1971 reprint of his seminal work *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (New York: Dover, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Jones, *Mexican War Workers in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1945).

<sup>5</sup> In Mexico, not only do graduate degrees ordinarily require theses, but the completion of a *licenciatura* (roughly the equivalent of a bachelor's degree) requires one. Unpublished theses often constitute a particularly valuable source of research and data.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Samora with Jorge Bustamante I. and Gilbert Cardenas, *Los Mojados. The Wetback Story* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).