

Mexican Immigration

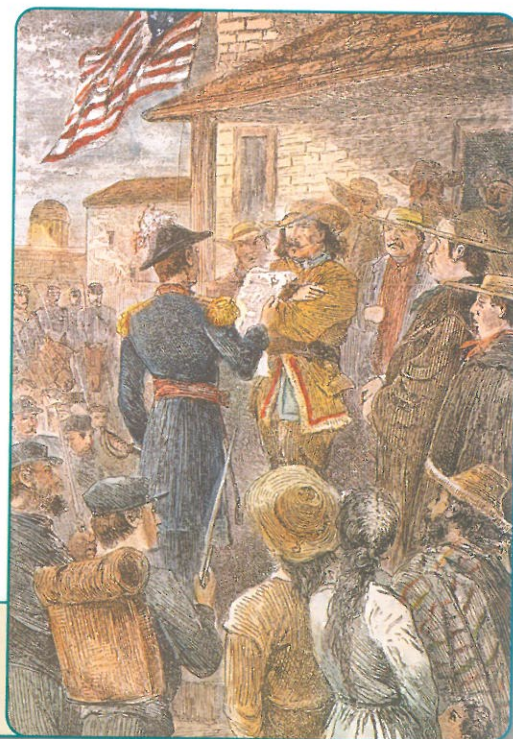
in the 1940s and 1950s

Imagine being poor, with little chance of finding work in your own country. You can't earn enough money to support your family. But then you hear there are plenty of jobs in another country. Best of all, that country is nearby. Since 1940, millions of Mexican people have moved to the United States. They hoped to find better jobs and homes.

Background on Mexico

Mexico lies along the southern border of the United States. At one time, much of the southwestern United States was part of Mexico. The United States acquired the land after the **Mexican War** in 1848. At that time, the Mexicans living in the area became Americans. They did not leave their homeland, but their country changed.

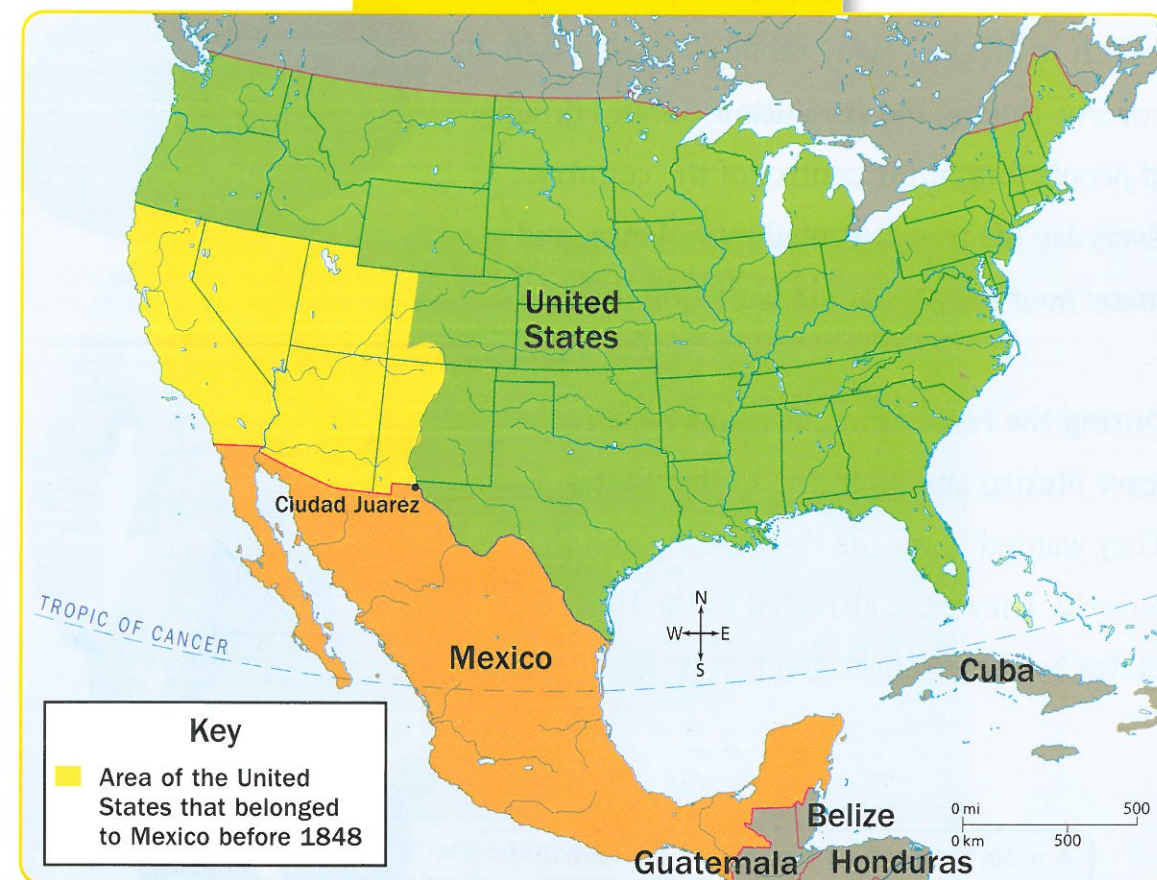
This illustration shows an American officer announcing that the United States had taken Santa Fe from Mexico.



Over the years, millions of Mexicans have journeyed north to the United States. Sometimes they came in search of work to support their families. At other times, they came to escape difficult conditions caused by war. In the 1940s and 1950s they came as a result of an agreement between the United States and Mexico. This agreement, called the Bracero Program, worked to the benefit of both countries.

Look at the map below. It shows the land that the United States acquired as a result of the Mexican War.

Mexico and the United States





Key Concept 1 People choose to immigrate for many different reasons.

Leaving Mexico for Peace and a Better Life

In the first half of the twentieth century, many Mexicans began to **immigrate** to the United States. There were several reasons for this, but the main reason was **economic**. Living conditions for many ordinary people in Mexico were poorer than those in the United States.

Before the Mexican Revolution in 1910, a small number of people controlled the power and wealth in Mexico. Many other people lived in poverty. During the **revolution**, several groups of people fought for control of the country. Everyday life was disrupted by violence, and many poor people had no work and little food.

During the revolution, Mexicans began to leave Mexico and go to the United States. They wanted to escape the fighting and the poverty. They were attracted to the United States by the prospect of a better life.

immigrate
to come to a new country to live



A rebel fighter from the Mexican Revolution

During **World War II**, the United States needed extra workers. Many United States workers joined the military and went to fight in the war. This created a shortage of workers in the factories and on the farms. The war also created many extra jobs. People were needed to build the planes, ships, and tanks used by the military.

The United States government began to encourage Mexican workers to fill these jobs. In 1942 the governments of the United States and Mexico signed an agreement called the Bracero Program. The program's purpose was to bring Mexican laborers to the United States to work for a short time on farms and railroads. These Mexican workers were known as **braceros**. The pay offered in the United States was better than most Mexicans could earn in Mexico. Many Mexican farmworkers left their families behind and crossed the border in large numbers to take up these jobs.



A bracero worker harvesting carrots



Key Concept 2 People who immigrate face many challenges.

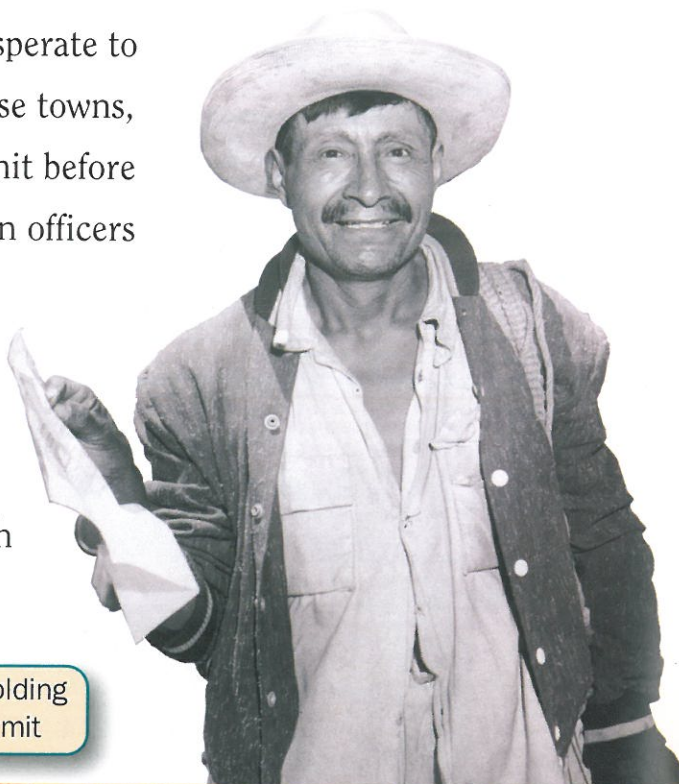
The Challenge of Immigration

It is never easy to immigrate to a new land. The Mexicans faced **challenges** in getting into the United States. They faced more challenges once they arrived.

challenges
things that make
life more difficult

The Journey from Mexico Though the journey from Mexico to the United States is not long, it was still difficult for Mexicans arriving under the Bracero Program. They had to deal with many official procedures before they could enter the United States.

Trainloads of Mexican workers arrived in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez, all desperate to get to the United States. Once in these towns, workers had to apply for a work permit before they could cross the border. American officers interviewed them about their work experience. Then the workers had a brief medical examination. Once a worker had been approved, he signed a **contract**, had his photograph taken, and received his permit.

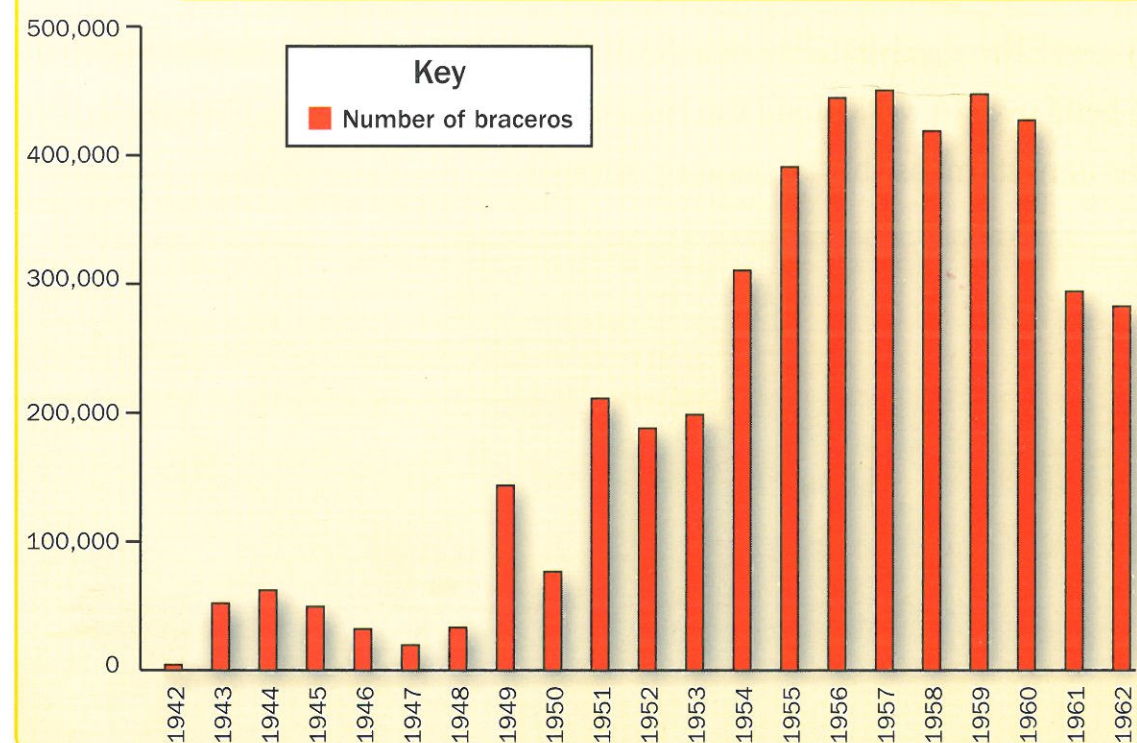


A bracero holding his work permit

When the paperwork was completed, the officers sent the workers to the border. There, the workers waited several days for their permits to be stamped by immigration officers. Each bracero's permit showed what jobs he was skilled at and what he would be expected to do. Possible jobs included picking cotton, tomatoes, and cucumbers or thinning sugar beets.

Next, the braceros were sent across the border to a center in the United States. American farmers came to this center to choose workers suited to their needs. The Bracero Program was in place for 23 years. In that time, over four million Mexican workers came to the United States to work.

Number of Braceros Brought to the United States (1942-1962)



Challenges in a New Land For the Mexican braceros there were many challenges to overcome in the United States. For example, very few workers could speak or read English. However, the contracts these workers had to sign were written in English. This meant that most workers did not understand what working conditions they were agreeing to.

Farmworkers worked long hours in dust, heat, or cold. They were exposed to dangerous **pesticides** that were sprayed on the crops they harvested. They were paid very low wages, lower than most American workers would accept.

Many braceros were exploited, or taken advantage of, by American farmers. The tools these workers had to use made the work very hard. One was the short-handled hoe, for thinning sugar beets. A worker had to bend over to work along the rows of beets. After 12 hours of work, it was almost impossible to stand up straight.



Mexican worker harvesting onions in California

Another challenge they faced was not being accepted by American society. At times during the twentieth century, Mexican immigrants were welcomed in the United States, as in the Bracero Program. At other times, they were not welcomed. After World War I, some Americans resented Mexicans and Mexican Americans and did not want to compete with them for jobs. This caused millions of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans to leave the United States.

Throughout the twentieth century, many Mexicans who did not have permission to work in the United States were eager to leave Mexico. Large numbers of people crossed the border and found work illegally. Because they were not supposed to be in the United States, they had no protection under the law. They had to work long hours for low pay.

Many of these challenges are still faced by Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans today.



Mexican people illegally crossing the Rio Grande River to seek work in the United States



Key Concept 3 People who immigrate contribute to the life and culture of the society they join.

Joining American Society

The United States is a country made up of immigrants. As with all immigrant groups, Mexicans have helped American **society**.

Mexican workers provided labor to the farms and factories of the United States. They also introduced some of their **culture** to their new country.

Mexicans in the Workforce The Bracero Program was popular with farmers and growers, so it continued until 1964. Some braceros returned to Mexico, but many former braceros stayed in the United States. Factory jobs were available in the Northeast and Midwest, especially in Chicago. Many farm laborers who had gone to the Midwest took up these jobs. They formed Mexican-American communities there. This made it easier for new immigrants to come and make their homes.

society

people living together in a group or nation



culture

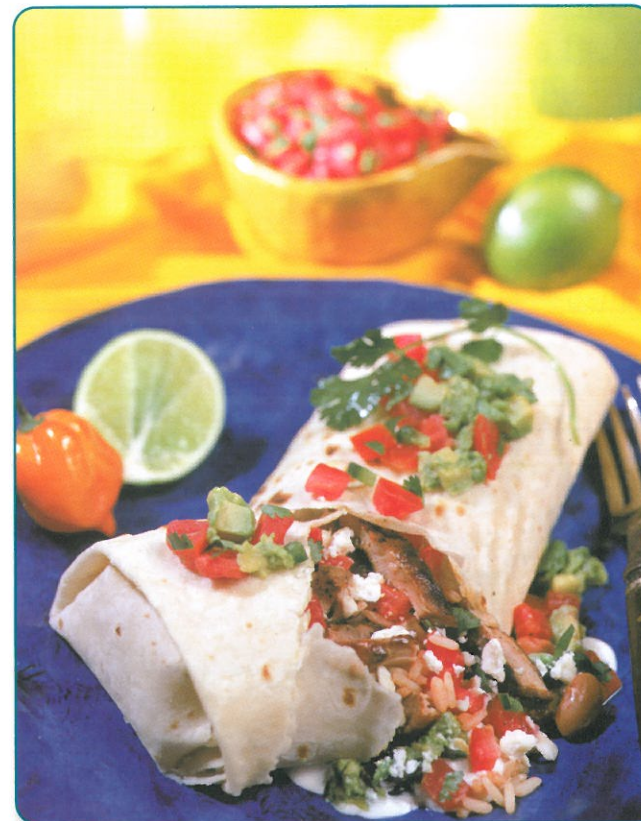
the traditions, language, dress, ceremonies, and other ways of life that a group of people share



A Mexican worker stirring corn in a tortilla factory

Mexican Culture in the United States Mexicans brought many parts of their culture to the United States. Mexican Americans celebrate their heritage every year on May 5th, or Cinco de Mayo, a public holiday in Mexico. On this day, Mexican-American communities organize **fiestas**, or parties, with food, costumes, music, and dance. Some communities have Cinco de Mayo parades.

Mexican culture is also part of everyday life in the United States. Mexican-style music and Mexican food, such as salsa, tacos, and tortillas, are popular. Americans also use Spanish words that have come from Mexico, such as ranch, burrito, and piñata.



A burrito



A piñata

The Mexican Contribution Over the years, Mexican Americans have made important contributions to American life. In the 1990s the number of Mexican immigrants increased in all regions of the United States, especially in the Midwest and Southeast. Mexicans have moved into every part of American society and have made contributions in many professions.

Many people of Mexican **descent** have accomplished great things. For example, Cesar Chavez helped start the United Farm Workers Union in the 1960s. He led farmworkers in their fight for better wages and working conditions. Chavez received many honors for his work, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994.

Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican-American poet and novelist. Students all over the world study her award-winning works. One of the most famous is a book called *The House on Mango Street*. It tells about the life of a young girl growing up in a Mexican family in Chicago.



Sandra Cisneros

About 20 million Americans today claim descent from Mexican immigrants or are immigrants themselves.



Think About the **Key Concepts**

Think about what you read. Think about the pictures and the graph. Use these to answer the questions. Share what you think with others.

1. Why did the immigrants discussed in this book leave their country?
2. What were some challenges the immigrants faced when they arrived in the United States?
3. How did the immigrants overcome the challenges they faced?
4. How did the immigrants contribute to the culture of the United States?