

The Melting Pot's Mexican Roots

By Grace Halsell

WASHINGTON—For two years I have been living with people on both sides of the Mexican border investigating the illegal immigrants who are entering this country.

Our border with Mexico is a line on a map that, in reality, is difficult to discern. On either side of that 2,000 mile border that runs from Brownsville, Tex., to just south of San Diego, Calif., there is the same expanse of brilliant sky, the same soil producing the same fruits and vegetables, and people who feel equally at home in Mexico or in the Southwest.

The borderlands comprising four American states and six Mexican states, are not two distinct countries so much as a binational, bicultural regional entity, a zone of interlocking economic, social and cultural interests.

Cruz Sedillo, 87 years old, can trace his family history in the Southwest for 12 generations, to the 1500's. A native of New Mexico, he observed, "Hispanos have always lived in the Southwest. We're second only to the Indians. And, like the Indians, we are an indigenous people."

The Spaniards were here more than two decades before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. El Paso, Tex., has been Spanish and Mexican far longer than it has been part of the United States.

All of what is now the Southwest once belonged to Mexico. In 1846, with the discovery of gold in California, President James K. Polk ordered United States troops to march into Mexico. By taking California, and the land between, he extended the United States to the Pacific.

Henry David Thoreau went to jail rather than pay taxes to support this war. Abraham Lincoln, then a freshman Congressman, accused President Polk of ordering United States troops "into the midst of a peaceful Mexican settlement, purposely to bring on a war." Ulysses S. Grant, a young second lieutenant in the Mexican war, called it a "political war," one of the "most unjust" ever waged.

By winning the war, the United States not only annexed half of Mexico, but acquired all the Mexican citizens who were living in the Southwest.

Mexicans still observe the anniversaries of their defeats at Chapultepec and Molino del Rey as national days of fasting and prayer. And as recently as 1943, Mexican schools were using maps designating the land we acquired as "territory temporarily in the hands of the United States."

This history is important in understanding why so many Mexicans come over the border illegally. I interviewed scores of Mexican nationals in American jails who had crossed without documents.

And, on several occasions, to better understand their experiences, I swam the Rio Grande, crawled through the sewers of Tijuana and was guided at night through the infamous "Smugglers Canyon" near San Diego.

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Undocumented workers do not feel they commit a crime in traveling north from Mexico. They call it going to *el norte*. As far as the Southwest is concerned, "we are the legals, the Anglos the illegals," one Mexican said.

Hispanos are the nation's youngest and fastest growing group and soon they will outnumber blacks as the largest minority. The largest number has come here from Mexico and they are scattered throughout this country — in New York and Chicago as well as the Southwest.

Today, every fifth Texan is of Mexican origin. In some of that state's southern counties, their proportion is as high as 98 percent. Los Angeles has 1.5 million Mexican-Americans and, after Mexico City, is the second largest "Mexican" city. Before 1985, it is predicted, Mexican-Americans will comprise a majority of California's population.

Already Hispanos swing many important elections. Some have argued that they delivered Texas — and Presidential victory — to Jimmy Carter. Others say they will determine the future for Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. of California.

Mexican immigrants often retain

their traditions and language. Many come from small villages, they retain customs and hold deep personal and religious convictions. The newcomers constantly renew the Mexican heritage of Mexican-Americans. And in doing so they are aided, as no earlier immigrant group was, by civil-rights legislation.

"The United States defeated Mexico and took the Southwest," a Mexican-American, Roberto Salazar, told me. "Now I think the conquerors are being conquered. Anglo culture is being influenced more than it wants to be, or is aware of."

Mexicans as well as Anglos are moving into the fastest growing part of the United States, and who will control the land there is still in doubt. Mexican-Americans may regain, through the ballot box, the control they lost through war.

Grace Halsell is author of the forthcoming book, "The Illegals."