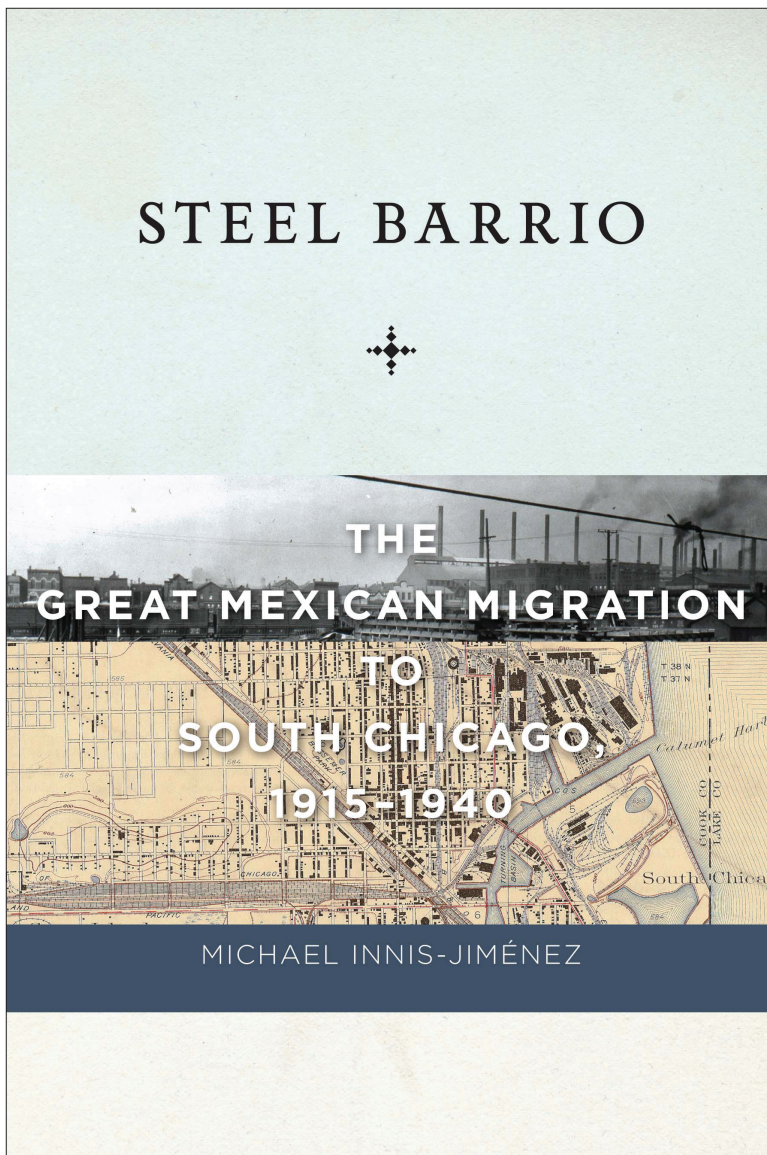


STEEL BARRIO

The Great Mexican Migration
to South Chicago, 1915–1940

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Since the early twentieth century, thousands of Mexican Americans have lived, worked, and formed communities in Chicago's steel mill neighborhoods. Drawing on individual stories and oral histories, Michael Innis-Jiménez tells the story of a vibrant, active community that continues to play a central role in American politics and society.

Examining how the fortunes of Mexicans in South Chicago were linked to the environment they helped to build, *Steel Barrio* offers new insights into how and why Mexican Americans created community. This book investigates the years between the World Wars, the period that witnessed the first, massive influx of Mexicans into Chicago. South Chicago Mexicans lived in a neighborhood whose literal and figurative boundaries were defined by steel mills, which dominated economic life for Mexican immigrants. Yet while the mills provided jobs for Mexican men, they were neither the center of community life nor the source of collective identity. *Steel Barrio* argues that the Mexican immigrant and Mexican American men and women who came to South Chicago created physical and imagined community not only to defend against the ever-present social, political, and economic harassment and discrimination, but to grow in a foreign, polluted environment.

Steel Barrio reconstructs the everyday strategies the working-class Mexican American community adopted to survive in areas from labor to sports to activism. This book links a particular community in South Chicago to broader issues in twentieth-century U.S. history, including race and labor, urban immigration, and the segregation of cities.

248 PAGES • 9 FIGURES, 17 HALFTONES, 7 MAPS
PAPER • 978-0-8147-2465-1

SUMMARY

Michael Innis-Jiménez introduces readers to the scope and arguments in the book. *Steel Barrio* is about how community members used the discrimination against them, a sojourner attitude, organized sports, mutual aid organizations, and other groups to bring together a diverse community of Mexicans and Mexican Americans—some educated, most not—to find ways to change their physical and cultural environment in order to survive. This book examines how the fortunes of Mexicans in South Chicago were linked to the built environment, their access to green space, and to their ability to change their physical and cultural surroundings. While examining how and why Mexicans acted on the industrial landscape by creating physical and cultural communities, *Steel Barrio* links their use of the urban environment to their ability to create, survive, and at times thrive. The questions addressed in this book link a microstudy of a particular community in South Chicago to broad issues in twentieth-century United States history, including urban growth and death, the segregation of cities, and the relationship of urban immigrants to their natural and built environment.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ Why does the author focus on South Chicago?
- ➔ Why study a Mexican community in the American Midwest instead of one in a traditionally Mexican city like Los Angeles or Houston?
- ➔ Why is this book important?

MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

pages 19-27

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on arguably the two largest, macro-level factors that shaped the timing and level of Mexican migration to the United States. The first of these was the revolutionary influences; the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion prompted tens of thousands of Mexicans to migrate to the United States. The second factor was a result of U.S. legislation. Restrictive immigration legislation increased a labor shortage in the industrial Midwest; because Mexicans were exempt from these 1921 and 1924 quota laws, they became the default choice for employers who did not want to hire African Americans. In short, revolution, riots, and race were significant factors in the migration of Mexicans to South Chicago.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the major differences between the immigration acts of 1921 and 1924?
- Why did Mexicans migrate to South Chicago?

FINDING WORK

pages 28-36

SUMMARY

This chapter argues that the Revolutionary influences in Mexico and restrictive U.S. immigration legislation of the 1920s—as well as *enganchistas*—played very important roles in pushing Mexican labor into the United States and limiting the available European worker pool for South Chicago industry. The nearby violence of the 1919 Race Riots encouraged managers to turn from African Americans to Mexicans whom they perceived as less likely to spark rioting. Steel mill managers chose their employees based on shifting racial hierarchies. Even as these hierarchies were based on mainstream ideologies of race, individual preferences for particular groups varied from individual to individual and also depended on the available labor pool. Managers who hired Mexicans did so out of a necessity created by their refusal to hire African Americans. A manager at East Chicago, Indiana’s Inland Steel said he started employing Mexicans in significant numbers in 1919.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ What is an *enganchista*?
- ➔ What role did *enganchistas* have in the Mexican migration to South Chicago?
- ➔ Why did many steel mill managers prefer Mexican immigrants to local African Americans?
- ➔ How and why did racial hierarchies shift?

SUMMARY

Events in Mexico and Chicago prompted an increasing number of Mexicans to enter South Chicago throughout the late 1910s and 1920s. Although individual and family motivations varied, Mexicans came to South Chicago for better-paying work, for community, and to join family who had preceded them. Even though the factors that prompted Mexican individuals and families to migrate to the Chicago area—and the routes they took—are almost as varied as the migrants themselves, discernable patterns emerge after a close examination of the migrants' motivations and routes. After early Mexican settlers to South Chicago created the initial groundwork of establishing physical and cultural Mexican communities, the migration networks grew exponentially. Chain and circular migration worked in tandem to create strong networks of new and returning Mexican migration to the area. Arguably the most popular Midwestern destination during much of the interwar period for Mexicans looking for work and a chance to prosper, the Chicago area provided employment, hope, and socioeconomic advancement for Mexicans, just as it had previously done for tens of thousands of European immigrants and African-American migrants from the American South. It is true that the migration and settlement patterns created by Mexican immigrants to South Chicago lie in the political and economic transformations occurring both within the United States and Mexico, but a close examination of the factors that led to Mexicans settling in South Chicago must include the immediate context of family and community that shaped people's responses to the pressures of everyday life. Examining the stories told by the individual migrants about their lives and journeys to South Chicago is useful in developing a better understanding of the circumstances, emotions, motivations and hardships that affected the everyday lives of those who migrated to South Chicago.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where did the Mexican immigrants come from and why Chicago?
- How does Mexican migration to Chicago differ from earlier Eastern European immigration to the area?
- Why do individual stories matter when learning about an event or community?

HOME AND WORK

pages 51-75

SUMMARY

By the time Mexicans and Mexican Americans started migrating to South Chicago, the area had been home to Serbs, Lithuanians, Greeks, Swedes, Germans, Croats, Slovenes, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Jewish immigrants, and the Irish. African Americans entered the area at about the same time as Mexicans. Like Mexicans, the vast majority of these European immigrants entered the United States as less desirable, unskilled or low-skilled workers racialized as less-than-white. Mexicans developed strategies that in time led to the development of a physical and cultural Mexican community in South Chicago. They were able to change their physical environment by, among other things, opening and supporting Mexican businesses and businesses that catered to the community. These strategies and the development of the community reinforced the need for members to maintain cultural expectations. It was culture, and the pressure brought on by those “defenders” of the culture within the community, that defined what work or duties were typically men’s work and women’s work. However, gender transgressions, where men did women’s work and women did men’s work, were not uncommon. These changes in gendered roles, such as married women entering the industrial workplace or men having to do domestic work when boarding in a male-only household, resulted from economic or social necessity, as well as from the evolution of the locally distinct Mexican culture. These roles remained malleable as the community grew, matured, and changed.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did South Chicagoans across the economic spectrum have negative, stereotypical images of Mexicans? What role did these negative images have in the life of Mexican immigrants in the area?
- When and why did immigrants start moving to the South Chicago area?
- How did “culture” affect the behavior of the men and women of the community?
- Why, do you think, were many tasks and jobs gendered as male or female jobs?
- What is environmental racism and how did it play out in the three Mexican neighborhoods of Chicago?

SUMMARY

This chapter looks at how the physical and geographical circumstances of South Chicago provided its Mexican community with prospects that differed from those in rural communities in Mexico and the other Mexican enclaves of the Chicago area. Moving into a pre-existing, ethnic working-class neighborhood in a crowded industrial environment had drawbacks when compared to rural life or life in the urban American Southwest, yet the opportunities provided by living in a densely populated neighborhood with a large Mexican population allowed for community-building opportunities. These opportunities, however, were gendered. Cultural limitations put on women and girls made it difficult for them to take advantage of many of the opportunities available in a large urban area. The arrival of Mexicans into South Chicago put them in direct competition with African Americans for unskilled steel mill positions. Mexicans, however, benefited from steel mill hiring practices that favored them over African Americans. Some steel mill managers justified discriminating against current and potential African-American steelworkers in favor of Mexicans because they worried that having Blacks in the workplace would put a strain on labor relations and would require the construction of separate eating and washing facilities to accommodate the de facto practices of segregation. The chapter also examines language and naturalization. Since many Mexican immigrants to South Chicago planned to return to Mexico, they did not actively seek to Americanize or naturalize. Those Mexicans who took advantage of English classes in order to improve employment prospects understood Spanish was a critical component of their cultural and political identity. They believed themselves to be sojourners who were escaping political turmoil and would eventually return to Mexico in a better economic position as when they had left.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What role did the railroads have in the steel mills hiring of Mexican laborers?
- How do you think South Chicago would have developed if Mexicans had never entered this industrial workplace and neighborhood?
- Why was speaking (or not speaking) Spanish so controversial? Explain both sides of this debate.
- What role did local banks have in the development of the Mexican community in Chicago?

RESISTANCE

pages 102-131

SUMMARY

This chapter begins with a somewhat long, but very revealing look at José Vasconcelos' presentation to Mexicans of Chicago. This was significant because he was an influential yet controversial Mexican national figure who created the modern Mexican educational system. He came to Chicago in 1928 as a candidate for president of Mexico. Although he lost the 1929 election to Pascual Ortiz, his visit to Chicago signaled the importance and influence of the local Mexican immigrant community barely a decade into its existence. Overall, this chapter, focuses on various acts of negotiation and resistance in the everyday lives of Mexicans in South Chicago and the surrounding Mexican communities. The book argues that the members of the Mexican community in the Chicago area developed and used forms of resistance in hopes of finding ways to improve their everyday life without compromising their sense of pride for Mexico or the facets of their Mexican cultural heritage they held close to their hearts. Members of the Mexican community formed mutual aid societies, pro-patria clubs, social clubs and athletic teams in and around South Chicago to reinforce a sense of Mexican cultural solidarity while simultaneously providing social and economic support for members of their community. By recognizing and not underestimating the significance of everyday forms of resistance and the politics of culture, as well as institutions and organizations not normally seen as vehicles for everyday and working class change, we can delve into the strategies that helped Mexicans in South Chicago cope with the oppressive environment that surrounded them. Labor union hostility toward Mexican workers further reinforced the importance of alternative sites of resistance.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is "continental citizenship" and why is that an important concept to this book?
- How did Mexican workers convey agency in such a hostile environment?
- What role did churches (both Catholic and Protestant) play in the everyday economic and social life of those in the community?

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

pages 135-157

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

In this chapter, the author argues that the events of the Great Depression in the Chicago area, including unemployment and repatriation, were critical in the evolution of a strong Mexican community in South Chicago that was smaller, had clear internal leadership, and was more physically and culturally ensconced in the neighborhood. Although involuntary repatriation programs were not as prevalent in Chicago compared to other cities with large Mexican communities, Depression-era unemployment affected Mexicans in South Chicago to at least the same degree that it affected Mexicans in other parts of the U.S. Despite this, the Mexican community of Chicago produced and nurtured leaders from within to provide direction and voice for community members during the crisis.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do you think the South Chicago Mexican community would have developed if the Great Depression had not happened? Why?
- How does the story of Mercedes Rios help us better understand the community at that time?
- Describe the concept of “Americanization.” Why did Mexicans try to avoid Americanization.

TEAMWORK

pages 158-180

SUMMARY

This chapter examines the development of sports teams and their leaders from organizers of recreational activities to founders of organizations that helped coalesce a physical and imaginary Mexican South Chicago identity and provided a means of interaction with other communities in and around Chicago. In examining the influence of the teams, this chapter examines methods used by community members to shape their environment in order to survive stress and the swirling pressures linked to the ever-present and increasing harassment, discrimination, and the popularity of repatriation drives that “encouraged” some to leave for Mexico. Organized sports were much more than a way to cope while waiting for work or relief. Youth and adult baseball provided a much-needed distraction for Mexicans in South Chicago who faced the social, political, environmental, and economic discrimination outlined in previous chapters. For Mexican business owners and other community leaders, baseball became an opportunity to create, instill pride, teach, celebrate, and organize the community. In short, baseball distracted, organized, and created.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can something like organized sports help with the survival of immigrants during the Depression?
- Do you agree with the argument about the role of sports and survival discussed in this chapter? Why or why not?
- Can you think of any other activities that might have served as sites of resistance against harassment and discrimination?
- How did organized sports and the depression itself affect the role of women in society?

pages 181-186

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why should we care about the creation and development of a distinct Mexican community in South Chicago?
- What is the role of individual stories in telling us what life was like for those in the community?
- What can the history of interwar South Chicago tell us about the role and responsibilities of immigrants?
- How does a history of Mexicans in interwar South Chicago help us better understanding the immigration debates of the twenty-first century?