

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BORDERING ON SOLIDARITY: ORGANIZING MEXICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN  
WORKERS IN THE U.S. MEXICO BORDERLANDS, 1880-1930

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BY  
ENRIQUE DÁVILA

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation is bookended by the lives of two activists named Clemente. The first Clemente, Clemente Vivero, was born in 1828 near Mexico City. In 1854, the twenty-six-year-old was studying to be a priest when his life changed as he became embroiled in the politics of *La Reforma* (1855-1861), a mid-century social and political movement which challenged the entrenched power of the corporatist institutions in Mexico with a particular emphasis on the Roman Catholic church. By 1872, Vivero had left the seminary, converted to Protestantism and was working as a colporteur and traveling minister in northern Mexico. For the next nine years, he preached the gospel from Mexico City to south Texas' Rio Grande Valley. To have been a Protestant minister in Catholic Mexico during the late nineteenth century was an arduous, daunting, and dangerous endeavor and by the end of his life at age 53, Clemente Vivero had the nervous demeanor and welts on his head to prove it.

The second Clemente, Clemente Nicasio Idar, was the maternal grandson of Clemente Vivero. Born in 1883, he was raised in Laredo, Texas. In his teens he apprenticed as a printer in his father's workshop. In 1918, at the age of 35, he was hired as a general organizer for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). He spent the next sixteen years organizing Mexican and Mexican American workers in the U.S. Southwest into labor unions affiliated with the AFL. To be a union organizer during the 1920s in "open shop" territory like the U.S. Southwest was arduous, daunting, and dangerous work; and when Clemente Idar died at the age of 51, he had a missing finger and a broken spirit, which he carried as badges of the difficult life he had lived.

Between the lifetimes of these two reformers lies a border history about Mexican and Mexican American activism that does not fit into neat categories. The Mexicans and Mexican Americans analyzed in this history are Catholic and Protestant; rich and poor; conservative and

liberal. There are reformers who fought for higher wages and those who lobbied to remove obstacles to maximum wealth; there are activists who envisioned a Mexican community of hard-working, bootstrap pulling entrepreneurs and those who wanted to see Mexicans organized into tightly-knit worker organizations with the power to sway governments and challenge prejudice. While diverse, they all contributed to the story of borderland activism during the lifespan of the two Clementes and the period of my project, 1880-1930. In an effort to find a common denominator with which to unify these seemingly distinct historical actors who supposedly belong to separate histories—Mexican liberalism, freemason history, the U.S. and Mexican labor movement, and Mexican American civil rights history—the dissertation centers on the activism of the family connecting the two Clementes: the Idars of Laredo, Texas.

\* \* \*

“Bordering on Solidarity: Organizing Mexican and Mexican Americans Workers in the U.S. Mexico Borderlands, 1880-1930,” traces three generations of transborder activism for economic justice conducted by the Idars of Laredo, Texas. The Idars’ activism began at the turn of the century when three industries in the southwestern United States—railroads, farming, and mining—became dependent on low-wage jobs often filled by Mexican workers. Beginning in 1910, Mexican immigrants began migrating to the Southwest in large numbers, rapidly enlarging the ethnic Mexican population.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this period, specifically between 1899 and 1907, Mexican

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation I use the term *Tejano* (and sometimes *México-Texano*) to refer to Texas-born people of Mexican heritage; I use *Mexican American* to refer to U.S.-born people of Mexican heritage; and I use *Mexicans* or *ethnic Mexicans* to refer to people of Mexican ancestry, regardless of their country of birth. Admittedly, applying “ethnic” to this group is imperfect since many of the people subsumed under this category were fighting against being viewed as “outsiders” or “others,” labels associated with the original use of the term “ethnic.” However, despite its imperfections, more recently the term implies a shared “racial, national, tribal,

immigration had hovered at just a few hundred annually. But by 1909, this number had increased to 15,600, and during the 1910s it rose to an average of 20,000 Mexican immigrants a year.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to this demographic shift in 1910, ethnic Mexicans in Texas were largely working-class people, with a tiny clique of powerful landowners and a small cohort of residents occupying middling sectors of the economy—journalists, teachers, and skilled tradesman. This latter group formed a small Tejano middle-class that was strongly connected to the wider Mexican populace in the U.S. border region through social and economic ties. They printed the community’s Spanish newspapers, taught the Spanish-speaking youth, and provided services and products for Mexicans in the region. With the influx of thousands of new Mexican residents, greater opportunities arose for the Tejano middle-class: greater opportunities to sell more goods, provide more services, and particularly important to this project, to create new forms of political power.

Members of the Idar family were part of a cadre of border leaders which historian Benjamin Johnson referred to as Tejano Progressives. Tejano Progressives recognized the potential collective power that could be created by uniting new migrants with older border residents. This cadre of border leaders attempted to channel that power into a network composed of mutual aid societies, freemason associations, and labor unions. They used these institutions to forge solidarity

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religious, linguistic, or cultural ... background.” This latter definition is close to the type of bond the Idars was trying to forge between Mexican and Mexican Americans. On the multiple definitions of “ethnic” see, Oxford English Dictionary, “ethnic.” On use of the term “ethnic Mexican” see, David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7. On problems with using the term “ethnic” when referring to Latinos see, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), Chapter four, especially, 81-86. See also, David A. Hollinger, “How Wide the Circle of “We”?” *American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos since World War II*, *The American Historical Review*, April, 1993, Vol 98, No. 2 pp. 317-337.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Goodman, *Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 32.

between Mexican nationals and U.S.-born Mexican Americans, by appealing to a shared language (Spanish) and mutual heritage (Mexican). These bonds, they hoped, would unite a diverse population of people who possessed different citizenship statuses and belonged to multiple class sectors, often with clashing political ideologies—all divisions which created obstacles to solidarity.

“Bordering on Solidarity,” examines milestones between 1880 and 1930, during which Nicasio Idar and his five eldest children—Clemente, Jovita, Eduardo, Elvira, and Federico—attempted to unite border residents.<sup>3</sup> From 1900-1911, the patriarch, Nicasio Idar, promoted mutual-aid, freethinking ideology, and anti-clericalism in his newspapers and freemason associations which catered to Mexican and Mexican Americans. The associations he helped maintain provided workers and middle-class Mexicans with a social space to debate and to discuss the problems of the day and propose modern solutions to those problems. Nicasio also published two newspapers, *La Revista Masónica* and *La Crónica*, in which he printed anti-clerical critiques alongside news of events occurring in Mexico and acts of prejudice occurring in Texas. By placing these ideas and events within one newspaper, he portrayed a vision of the border as he saw it—one in which Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans possessed a shared Mexican heritage that had the potential to transform into political and economic power via a future Mexican solidarity.

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<sup>3</sup> There were at least nine Idar children who lived beyond adolescence: Clemente (1883-1934), Jovita (1885-1947), Eduardo (1887-1947), Elvira (1892-1925), Federico (1893-1938), José (1898-1969), Moises (1902-1953), Juvencio (1903-1947), and Aquilino (1904-1989). As many as five—Clarita, Moises, Enrique, unnamed, Lola—may have died either near birth, or at a young age, although details about these children have been hard to confirm. See, “Family Records,” n.d., Federico Idar and Idar Family Papers Box 4 Folder 18, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

Nicasio's goals were inherited by his children. From 1910-1918, they attempted to harness the historical and cultural bonds of border residents into various forms of transborder unity in their activism. His eldest children demonstrated patriotism to both Mexico and the United States by volunteering their aid in both the Mexican Revolution and World War I. They did so during the 1910s, a period when many border residents were forced to "choose sides" between Mexico and the United States as patriotism and nativism spiked in the wartime borderlands. From 1918 to 1930, the eldest Idar sibling, Clemente, provided a unifying approach to an issue that had vexed efforts to unify Mexican and Mexican Americans: immigration. As an organizer for the AFL, he supported incorporation of all Mexicans (regardless of citizenship) into unions while at the same time opposing unregulated immigration from Mexico which was encouraged and maintained by agriculturalists who exploited Mexican migrants. By focusing on the exploits of the agricultural industry rather than on the supposed need for low wage migrant workers, Clemente revealed a nuanced approach to immigration that was centered on worker rights.

In summary, the Idar family practiced an activism centered on transborder unity and focused on the interest and needs of a broad spectrum of Mexicans residing in the border region. From 1880-1930, between the genesis of the agricultural industry in the Southwestern United States and the Great Depression, Mexican civil rights focused on the plight of Mexican workers. This focus was multi-faceted and far from egalitarian. Middle-class Tejanos were separated from the common laborer through wealth, status, and education. They often held paternalistic views of migrant laborers, depicting them as a people in need of their tutelage. Yet they also structured their lodges, published newspapers, and organized their club meetings in such a way that made space for working-class people. Middle-class Tejanos may have been genuinely committed to this

alliance, but they also had no choice since it was working-class people who made up the bulk of the Mexican populace in the border region.

In an area populated by Mexicans from different racial, ideological, and class backgrounds, the Idar family members attempted to forge solidarity on the basis of shared linguistic, historic and cultural ties. Whether in civic, labor, or political organizing, all of their successes were short-lived and succumbed to the power of larger structural forces (e.g. a strike in chapter five ends by federal injunction). Yet their short-term successes reveal the potential power that existed in worker-oriented, transnational organizing, and provides valuable perspective on U.S.-Mexico immigration, and the early-twentieth-century Mexican labor movement.

### *Historiography*

This study of the Idar family, bookended by the two Clementes, is a political history of Mexican activism from 1880-1930. The term “political” is used here in a broad sense covering the way people, groups, and institutions manage power. Historian Eli Zaretsky provides a useful distinction between politics in a narrow sense, “voting, policy disputes, and party factions,” from politics in a traditional sense, “referring to ‘public’ values of justice and of freedom” tied to “social power [held in] classes, the sexual division of labor, [and] the role or race.”<sup>4</sup> This broad definition of political history places this dissertation within a body of literature examining how Mexican leaders and institutions in Texas organized to attain social, economic, and political equality in the lives of

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<sup>4</sup> Eli Zaretsky, “What Is Political History?: The Question of the Public and the Private.” *Reviews in American History* 41, no. 3 (September 3, 2013): 558. On a more expansive understanding of “politics” see also, Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

Mexican and Mexican Americans in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I argue Nicasio and his eldest offspring first harnessed social and economic networks to provide mutual-aid—loans, life-insurance, burial assistance, legal counsel—and later, improved labor conditions.

Their activism between the turn of the century and the Great Depression responded to the subjugation of Mexicans in the borderlands. Sociologists and historians have documented how the United States' imperial war against Mexico resulted in the cession of Mexico's northern territory (1846-1848). American imperialism, combined with the rise of agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century, created an exploitative, racialized labor regime in which Mexicans living in the areas annexed by the United States became second-class citizens.<sup>6</sup> In Texas, between 1880 and

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<sup>5</sup> José A. Rivera, "Mutual Aid Societies in the Hispanic Southwest: Alternative Sources of Community Empowerment," *Southwest Hispanic Research Institute*, September 1, 1984; Mario T. García, *Mexican-Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican-American Political Organization* (University of Texas Press, 1993); Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*; Emilio Zamora, "Mutualist and Mexicanist Expressions of a Political Culture in Texas," in *Mexican-Americans in Texas History: Selected Essays*, ed. Emilio Zamora, Cynthia Orozco, and Rodolfo Rocha (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2000); Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican-Americans, and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Michael A. Olivas, ed., *In Defense of My People: Alonso S. Perales and the Development of Mexican-American Public Intellectuals* (Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2012); Carlos Kevin Blanton, *George I. Sánchez: The Long Fight for Mexican-American Integration*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Julie Leininger Pycior, *Democratic Renewal and the Mutual Aid Legacy of US Mexicans* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014); Cynthia Orozco, *Agent of Change: Adela Sloss-Vento, Mexican-American Civil Rights Activist and Texas Feminist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979); Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880 - 1940* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego*,

1930, organizations grounded in the mutual-aid tradition, formed to provide services—life insurance, funeral assistance, loans, legal aid—to Mexican workers who were segregated and left vulnerable to exploitation and violence.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Chicano/a historians published scholarship studying these ethnic Mexican associations. In their works, they placed a heavy emphasis on how pre-Depression Era civil-rights leaders were socially and politically oriented towards Mexico.<sup>8</sup> This was partially a response to a generation of Chicano/a activists (late 1960s and 1970s) who viewed many of the mutual aid and volunteer association leaders of the early twentieth century as accommodationists and *vendidos* (sell-outs). Much of this ire was directed at the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) which formed in 1929, but was at least eight years in the making.<sup>9</sup> LULAC

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1904-1923 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836 - 1916* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2006); Nicholas Villanueva, *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017); Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican-American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Examples include: California's *El Confederación de Sociedad Mexicanas* (1914), Arizona's *Alianza Hispano-Americana* (1894), northern New Mexico and southern Colorado's *Sociedad Protección Mutual de Trabajadores Unidos* (1900). In Texas, members of the Idar family participated in *Sociedad "Hijos de Benito Juárez* (Nicasio), *Los Caballeros de Honor* (Nicasio and Clemente), *La Liga Feminista* (Jovita Idar), and later, the League of United Latin America Citizens (Clemente and Eduardo).

<sup>8</sup> José E. Limón, "El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Contemporary Chicanismo," in *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Francisco H. Vázquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 179;" Zamora, "Mutualist and Mexicanist Expressions of a Political Culture in Texas;" F. Arturo Rosales, "Shifting Ethnic Consciousness in Houston," *Aztlán* 16, no. 1-2 (1985), 71-91.

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Orozco, "League of United Latin American Citizens," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/league-of-united-latin-american-citizens>. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

leaders organized the association to fight against Mexican prejudice while also promoting American patriotism and the virtues of American citizenship. Some Chicano activists abhorred LULAC's "middle-class interests, assimilation, and political accommodation" and instead focused on maintaining an amorphous, ahistorical "Mexican culture."<sup>10</sup> In response, scholars like Emilio Zamora, Cynthia Orozco, Mario T. García, and Jose E. Limón argued that the early ethnic Mexican leaders working within mutual-aid organizations actually crafted strategic challenges to the status quo and made practical accommodations to gain victories for the Mexican community as a whole. The new scholarship re-evaluated LULAC leaders and found precursors to the Chicano movement in people like Nicasio Idar.<sup>11</sup>

"Bordering on Solidarity" builds on this important work but strategically abstains from entering the debate concerning shifting national loyalties. Instead, the dissertation focuses on the transition from worker-oriented movements to those led by the professional class. This project argues that border mutual-aid associations, from 1890-1918, were led by a self-educated, middling sector of journalists, teachers, and skilled workers—a Tejano middle-class. These middle-class Tejanos were a distinct socioeconomic sector of society set apart from both the powerful landowners *and* the poor and working-class manual laborers. Yet they were more economically and socially connected to the working class. World War I changed the landscape of the border region and created new cleavages between the Mexican populace. During World War I, border residents joined the military and/or found new work in wartime industries, allowing them, for the first time, to move up the socioeconomic ladder into the professional sector.<sup>12</sup> In a short period of

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<sup>10</sup> Orozco, *No Mexican, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> José A. Ramírez, *To the Line of Fire: Mexican Texans and World War I* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2009).

time, ethnic Mexican lawyers, professors, government bureaucrats, and agriculturalists began to take leadership positions in new south Texas organizations such as the LULAC.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, the self-educated middle-class Tejanos of old, steeped in the mutual-aid tradition, were being replaced by lawyers like Alonso S. Perales, who served in the Army during World War I and went to college in Washington D.C. before passing the bar in Texas. Perales became part of a new cohort of “Tejano Professionals” who came to lead the civil-rights movement in Texas. This new cohort moved away from focusing on the interests of the manual laborers and instead focused on creating upward mobility for motivated youth and removing the stigma of social and legal inferiority attached to ethnic Mexicans in the form of segregated public facilities, unequal access to voting, and prohibition from serving on juries.

My project uses the Idar family to help mark this important transition. It does so by tracing the trajectory of their worker focused activism from its roots in the late nineteenth century all the way to Clemente Idar’s clash with LULAC leadership in 1930. This event embodied the transition to professional elite driven associations. The transition this project reveals is similar to the one Risa Goluboff highlights in her work, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*.<sup>14</sup> Goluboff’s book is set in a later period, but similarly shows how the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), after 1950, shifted from a cross-class defense of African-Americans, including worker rights, to a focus on the “stigma of governmental classifications” as the “essence

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<sup>13</sup> García, *Mexican Americans*; Márquez, *LULAC*; David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*; Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*.

<sup>14</sup> Risa Lauren Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of Jim Crow” and “not the material inequality black workers experienced as a result of the interdependent public and private Jim Crow complexes”<sup>15</sup>

This project also examines how the issue of unchecked immigration from Mexico divided ethnic Mexican activists within LULAC. In *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, still one of the best texts on the subject, historian David Gutiérrez analyzed over a century of Southwestern activism to uncover the effects continuous immigration had on the ethnic Mexican community of the Southwest. Gutiérrez wrote:

[since the turn of the century] large numbers of Mexican immigrants ...forced Mexican Americans to come to daily decisions about who they [were]—politically, socially, and culturally...Consequently...Mexican American activists...had to make judgments about their own sense of culture, about their ethnic self-identification and national allegiances, and...[w]hether they [would choose] to work only on behalf of American citizens or ... what they considered to be a broader cultural community including immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

Gutiérrez’ framework considered a spectrum of responses to Mexican immigration, ranging from “Mexican Americans who tend[ed] to view Mexican immigrants as a threat” to those who “[saw] little difference between their position in American society and that of more recent immigrants.”<sup>17</sup>

My work contributes to this ongoing debate on the effects of immigration by presenting Clemente Idar’s less-studied and unique approach to immigration. He advocated for organizing ethnic Mexicans into labor unions (regardless of citizenship status) and for immigration restrictions as a dual-pronged strategy with the same end goal: improving the lives of Mexican workers as a whole. His experience organizing workers in Arizona, Central Texas, and Colorado shaped his belief that the agricultural economy of the Southwest was an exploitative regime fueled and sustained by the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.

demand for low-wage immigrant workers. Therefore, he championed incorporating immigrants into unions while at the same time calling for a reduction of immigration from Mexico.

The history of Clemente's approach to immigration also engages with the diplomatic labor history between Mexico and the United States between 1918 and 1928. Clemente Idar was a key interlocutor between labor organizations in both countries and he was a champion of the idea of transnational worker solidarity. He envisioned a future in which workers in Mexico and in the United States would be members of mutually recognized international unions. In this alternative future, Mexican immigrants would be able to travel to the United States, union card in hand, and immediately join the local union in their place of work. He believed a transnational worker alliance would give the labor movements of both countries the tools to prevent worker exploitation by transnational capitalists. Clemente worked for the Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL)—an international alliance of labor movements in the United States and Latin America, but more specifically an alliance between the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Diplomatic historians have studied the PAFL, mostly through the actions of Luis N. Morones and Samuel Gompers, CROM and the AFL's most important leaders respectively.<sup>18</sup> Scholars Harvey Levenstein, Sinclair Snow, and Gregg Andrews

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<sup>18</sup> Sinclair Snow, *The Pan-American Federation of Labor* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964); Camile N. Buford, "A Biography of Luis N. Morones, Mexican Labor and Political Leader" (Ph.D., Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1971); Harvey A. Levenstein, *Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico: A History of Their Relations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pub. Co, 1971); Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1924* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1991); David Montgomery, "2007 SHGAPE Distinguished Historian Address: Workers' Movements in the United States Confront Imperialism: The Progressive Era Experience," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 1 (January 2008): 7–42; Michael Sullivan, "Labouring for Citizenship," *Left History* 22, no. 1 (February 9, 2019).

largely agree that the PAFL's larger goal of Pan-American solidarity was often subordinate to more practical goals such as restricting immigration or securing a privileged position within each participating confederation's respective government.<sup>19</sup> They show how Morones and Gompers were much more interested in using the PAFL to advance diplomatic goals such as ensuring Mexican loyalty (or at least neutrality) to the allied cause during World War I, and gaining U.S. recognition of Álvaro Obregón's post-revolutionary administration in Mexico between 1920 and 1924. They used Pan-American solidarity as leverage rather than an end in and of itself.

However, I argue that the lofty ideals they espoused in public had real consequences for organizers on the ground working to make their insincere rhetoric into a reality. Idar worked to organize Mexican laborers as if there was a real chance to create an international alliance between Mexican labor unions and American unions. In a few key instances he demonstrated how transborder solidarity could manifest into gains for both labor movements (Chapter 5). Scholars who study the PAFL from the top down, view the transnational labor solidarity promoted by Gompers and Morones as disingenuous and self-serving. Clemente Idar's activism on the ground-level provides a different view. Through his eyes one can envision how transborder labor cooperation might have led to an alternative future: one in which Mexican laborers, allied with U.S. laborers, worked together to combat the power of transnational capital.

This understanding of the way workers and capital moved across borders is derived from the work of transnational scholarship which studies the ways in which social movements, ideas, people, rebellions, and money circulate across national boundaries.<sup>20</sup> Of this scholarship, two

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<sup>19</sup> Snow, *The Pan-American Federation of Labor*; Levenstein, 119-125; *Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico*, 6-7; Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder?*.

<sup>20</sup> On transnational studies see, Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Elliott Young, "Transnationalizing Borderlands History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 27-53;

works are vital to the study of the Idar family. First, in his book *Revolution in Texas: How A Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*, Benjamin H. Johnson studies south Texas and northern Mexico through an analysis of the 1915 Plan de San Diego—a south Texas uprising pitting ethnic Mexicans against Anglo-American Texans. In order to study the effects of the rebellion, he classified different sectors of border society and placed the Idar family under the label Tejano Progressives.<sup>21</sup> Johnson described Tejano Progressives as: “ethnic Mexicans [who] sought to create a new sort of accommodation, one based on equal economic opportunity, ethnic pluralism, and respect for Mexican cultural heritage.” They were rooted in the tradition of nineteenth-century Mexican liberalism which promoted a constitutionally supported central government voted on by free people who were “unfettered by economic dependency or such corporate entities as an established church or Indian communities.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in her book, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights*, Gabriela González studied the “gendered and class-conscious political activism of Mexican-origin people in Texas from 1900-1950, with a sharp focus on the role middle-class women played in transborder activism to “redeem the Mexican masses” from subjugation in the United States.<sup>23</sup> González examined Nicasio Idar and his family, labeling them “mexico-tejano

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Transnational studies on border environment see, Casey Walsh, *Building the Borderlands: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Mexico-Texas Border*, no. 22 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); C. J. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the US-Mexico Divide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019); On examples of transnational social histories See, Geraldo L Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Sonia Hernández, *Working Women into the Borderlands*, (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2014)

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Texas Revolution*, 42-53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

middle-class reformers” who were part of a border society that believed in the politics of respectability, “the *gente decente* sector of society.”<sup>24</sup> She writes, “At the heart of their activism lay a strong desire to effect social change through cultural transformations or the cultural redemption of Mexican-origin people, particularly the underprivileged.”<sup>25</sup> Johnson’s and González’ work provide a foundation for my study of the Idar family’s activism and the transborder socioeconomic terrain in which they operated during the 1910s. My work builds on their scholarship by tracing their activism from an earlier era—the mid nineteenth century to a later date, the Great Depression. This expanded timeline reveals how their approach to worker rights formed in an earlier era was replaced by activism oriented towards middle-class and professional elites in the post-World War I era.

By focusing on an earlier period, this dissertation also situates the Idar family within a reform tradition that they have not normally been associated with: populism. Populism, in the United States, coalesced in the 1890s in the southern and western states. The movement eventually produced the People’s Party in 1892 and the party’s adherents were known as “Populists.” U.S. Populists sought to curtail the entrenched power of corporations (e.g. banks, railroads) which had gained an inordinate amount of power and wealth during this “gilded age” in American history. As historian Charles Postel noted, “[Populists] assailed the monopolists’ grip on ‘sources of intelligence’ and access to knowledge”<sup>26</sup> and envisioned an alternative capitalism in which private enterprise coalesced with both cooperative and state-based economics.<sup>27</sup> This dissertation demonstrates how the reforms proposed by Tejanos in south Texas were quite similar to those

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5.

being proposed by Populists in the Midwest and southern states. Recently, historian Gregg Cantrell even uncovered a small contingent of Tejano Populists who were active in south Texas hinting at the need for my scholarship on Tejano Populism.<sup>28</sup> While neither Vivero, nor the Idars were ever officially associated with the People's Party, they, like their populist counterparts, also sought to reform the power of agribusiness and railroads. The reforms the Idar family called for—fair wages, education, safe labor conditions, and free thinking—addressed issues particular to Mexican people, but also connected with the larger populist reform movement in this period. I would also argue that they practiced a unique form of Tejano populism, by challenging the corporate body most influential amongst Mexicans in the border region—the Catholic church. Their attacks on the Catholic church shared a similar anti-monopolist spirit common in turn-of-the-century United States.<sup>29</sup> Vivero, and the Idars promoted Protestantism and education as a way to conjure a new future in which Mexican men and women would be free of the church's monopolistic grip on the minds of Mexican men and women.

In sum, the history of the Idars allows us to bridge seemingly distinct historical categories across borders to show how the reform movements in Mexico and the United States derived from many of the same political, economic, and social changes occurring in both countries.

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<sup>28</sup> Cantrell highlights the political affiliation of Vicente F. Carvajal, Andrés López Montalbo. See, Gregg Cantrell, "'Our Very Pronounced Theory of Equal Rights to All': Race, Citizenship, and Populism in the South Texas Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (December 1, 2013), 668, 669, 682. See also, Gregg Cantrell, *People's Revolt: Texas Populists and the Roots of American Liberalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> On the anti-monopoly movement in the United States see, Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), Chapter 3; Charles Postel, *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), Chapter 2.

### *Chapter Outline*

The project begins in the late nineteenth century to explain how this worker-oriented activism was rooted in the Idar family's maternal grandfather, Clemente Vivero. The first chapter explains how Vivero's beliefs were forged in the crucible of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico amongst Protestants, Mexican liberals, and educated, free-thinking urbanites. By the end of the century, Vivero preached his way from central Mexico to the periphery, transporting his beliefs to a community of working-class Protestants, Freemasons, and mutual-aid residents at the U.S-Mexico border. The second chapter centers on border residents, like Vivero's son-in-law, Nicasio Idar, who adapted free thinking ideologies and critiques of hegemony to a border region full of working-class migrants. In chapter three, the dissertation analyzes how Nicasio Idar championed worker rights in the border region as a newspaper owner and mutual-aid and freemason elder. In the decade leading up to the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Nicasio and his progeny—primarily Clemente, Jovita, Eduardo, and Federico—organized social and political rights campaigns to aid subjugated poor and working-class Mexicans in a militarized border region. At the heart of my project is the activism of the eldest Idar sibling, Clemente, who I show took this worker-oriented ideology to its logical conclusion when he was hired to organize Mexicans for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In chapters four and five, I examine the strategies Clemente utilized to form a transborder labor movement which flourished between 1918 and 1930, a period when the needs of the post-revolutionary Mexican government overlapped with the interests of the AFL. Chapter five shows how Clemente's organizing supported the 1922 Railway Shopmen's Strike in El Paso, Texas. The final chapter of the project explores Clemente's role in the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and explains how his clashes with other LULAC leaders over immigration

signaled a changing of the guard from a focus on Mexican workers to activism largely attendant to expanding the members of the professional Mexican sector.

The economic crisis of 1929 marked an inflection point as Mexicans were deported and labor unions were decimated. In the post-depression era, labor activism once again became divided sharply along national interests.

This dissertation traces the history of the Idars, starting with the reform roots set by the first Clemente in the late 1880s and culminating with the rise and fall of transborder solidarity marked by the career of the second Clemente in 1920s. In doing so, this project reveals a brief era in border history when a cross-class, transborder activism arose that cultivated political ideologies and community institutions created out of shared, rather than divided, experience.

## **Chapter 1: The Roots of Reform: The Liberal and Evangelical Origins of the Idar Family's Activist Ideology, 1828-1914**

### *Introduction*

In 1879, Clemente Abraham Vivero, a worn-out Mexican Protestant minister, published a poem in a Rio Grande City newspaper titled “The Fanatical Roman Catholic Cleric.” Vivero described a “Rabid, fanatic[al]” cleric who gets up in the morning to “throw his disgusting slime” at his church-going audience. He wore a “rosary and cross around his throat, but in his hand, a dagger he flaunt[ed].” He had a “thirst for blood,” “a chest filled with hate and anger,” and in every city he visited, Vivero wrote, “riots arose.” The Protestant minister ended his poem by noting that if one wants to find this rabid cleric, they need only go to the Roman Catholic church.<sup>1</sup> This harsh caricature of an imaginary Catholic priest was at odds with the religious beliefs of the border city’s Spanish-speaking community located in the Catholic stronghold of south Texas. What made it even more remarkable was that it came from a man who was once in line to be a Catholic priest in Mexico City.

Vivero developed this obsessive anti-clericalism over a lifetime of tragedy. During his journey from Mexico City to the border region, he was persecuted, bruised, and battered for his political and religious beliefs, never receiving the recognition he felt he deserved. But while he never received accolades for his work, his grandchildren did; and they did so by adopting the belief-system Vivero espoused. Vivero was the maternal grandfather of the Idar family and a key influence on their activist ideology. This chapter chronicles Vivero’s transformation from a committed Catholic in Mexico City to an anti-clerical Protestant minister in the border region of south Texas to reveal the ideological origins of the Idar family’s opposition to rigid hierarchies

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<sup>1</sup> Clemente A. Vivero, “El fanatismo clericó-romanista,” Box 4, Folder 17, Federico Idar and Idar Family Papers, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin (herein cited FIIP).

and their belief in free-thinking ideology.

Like their grandfather, the Idar family members were seen by many in the border region as anti-Catholic. This was an understandable assumption. The Idar family owned and edited a regional newspaper, *La Crónica*, which between 1909 and 1911 published a slew of articles criticizing the Catholic church's hierarchy and its view on women.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in 1909, the critiques so incensed the editors of a rival Jesuit periodical that they asked faithful Catholic women to go from house to house asking if residents were subscribers to *La Crónica*, and if so, imploring them to switch to a Catholic-friendly periodical.<sup>3</sup> Another rival editor, Prisciliano Aldama, took the extra step of asking Laredo residents to boycott any business that purchased ads in *La Crónica* in order to "help this anti-Christian paper die."<sup>4</sup> Many clearly considered the family's publication to be an enemy of Catholicism and the Idar family, like their grandfather, were deemed anti-Catholic Protestants.<sup>5</sup>

A careful examination of the family's history reveals that the Idars and their grandfather were open-minded about faith while deeply opposed to rigid hierarchies. Nicasio, Vivero's son-in-law, was most likely raised Catholic; yet, he adopted his wife Jovita's Protestantism when the two married on March 19, 1882.<sup>6</sup> The Idars raised their children Protestant, and enrolled three of

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<sup>2</sup> See, *La Crónica*, "El Primer Año de Vida," January 8, 1910 which mentions articles written in 1909 including "La Iglesia Católica y la Mujer" and translated version of Alex M. Cordey's "Desenvolvimiento del Papado Romano."

<sup>3</sup> *El Guarda del Bravo* was an 8 page bi-weekly Spanish newspaper. Its editor was Prisciliano Aldama. See, "Guarda del Bravo," *Laredo Weekly Times*, June 21, 1908, 11.

<sup>4</sup> "El Cristianismo del Catolicismo," January 8, 1910, *La Crónica*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Texas Marriages, 1837-1973", database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:V2MF-VW7>: 22 January 2020), search for Jovita Vibera in entry for Nicasio Ydar, 1882.

them in Protestant schools.<sup>7</sup> Almost all of the children remained active Protestants throughout their lives with the exception of Nicasio's oldest son, Clemente (born November 11, 1883 and named after his grandfather) who converted to Catholicism at the behest of his wife Laura. Despite the family's commitment to Protestantism, however, Clemente was not disowned. His mother continued to write him letters and his younger brothers and sisters continued to revere him. While the articles printed in *La Crónica* seemed intolerant of Catholicism, the family possessed a more nuanced relationship to faith than their newspaper articles would suggest.

This family's larger view of faith was inextricably tied to their politics and belief in free thinking. This commitment to "free-thinking" was molded by Vivero's extraordinary life traveling through Mexico and eventually making a home in the south Texas-Mexico border region. While this chapter reveals that the border was not a homogenized Catholic community, it also challenges the notion of static identities based on rigid ideologies. By focusing on the *formation* of an ideology rather than the outcome, it illustrates the dynamism of the Idar family's beliefs and documents the evolution of that belief system over the course of the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries.

Using Protestant archives and periodicals, Catholic church records, and family lore, this chapter focuses on the life of the family's maternal grandfather Clemente Abraham Vivero, and his transition from being a committed Catholic, training to be a priest in central Mexico to a Protestant preacher in south Texas. This transition was far from inevitable. It took place during a pivotal time in Mexican history when reformist ideas and liberal ideologies were undergoing

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<sup>7</sup> The Holding Institute was originally named the Laredo Seminary. It was a missionary school started in 1880 by the Methodist Episcopal church, South. The name of the school changed to the Holding Institute in 1913 in honor of the school's first superintendent, Nannie Emory Holding. See, Nannie Emory Holding, *A Decade of Mission Life in Mexican Mission Homes* (Publishing House Methodist Episcopal South Barbee & Smith Agents, 1895).

multiple transformations. Along his travels through Mexico, Vivero developed a belief system based on his experience within Catholic, Protestant, and liberal networks. Vivero not only left his progeny connections to a network of border reformers, but also a critical apparatus to combat the challenges they faced in the early twentieth-century. The next generation of Idars, Vivero's grandchildren, adopted their grandfather's belief in free thought, and his opposition to rigid hierarchy, using these attributes to help form a unique Tejano ideology that would serve as the basis for a twentieth-century progressive border coalition. This ideology combined populist critiques of large corporate bodies such as railroad companies, but also applied the critiques to the Catholic church—the corporate body which held the most power in the daily lives of Mexicans on both sides of the border.

#### *Clemente Vivero's Early Life*

Although much of Vivero's early life remains obscure, certain aspects of his personal history can be pieced together through Catholic records and contemporary accounts about his life. Catholic records indicate that José Clemente de Jesús Vivero Alva was born to Estanislao Vivero and Petra de Alva three days before his christening date, December 1, 1828 and was baptized at Santa María de los Lagos Catholic church, in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco.<sup>8</sup> Whether he was adopted by the Viveros or born into the family remains a mystery. At the appropriate age, Clemente was sent to a Catholic seminary college.<sup>9</sup> According to his friend and colleague Samuel A. Purdie, Vivero was,

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<sup>8</sup> "México bautismos, 1560-1950," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NGZR-Q8P> : 11 February 2018), search for José Clemente De Jesús Bivero Alva, 01 December 1828; citing SANTA MARIA DE LOS LAGOS, LAGOS DE MORENO, JALISCO, MEXICO, reference; FHL microfilm 221,431.

<sup>9</sup> See, Interview with Aquilino I. and Guadalupe Idar, 1984, interviewed by Jerry Poyo and Tom Shelton, October, 26, 1984, Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Collection, OHT 331.8 I18, University of Texas at San Antonio.

<https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4/id/1304/> (herein cited Aquilino Idar

“educated in a Catholic college, and trained in the theological course.”<sup>10</sup> Students who attended Mexican seminaries during this period were expected to study Latin for four years, followed by three years of general philosophy—theoretical physics, mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and ethics. After 1843, some seminaries in Mexico introduced new curricula: chemistry, mathematics, geography, political economy, modern foreign languages, legislation, and law.<sup>11</sup> As a seminarian, Vivero was the recipient of a top-notch education and learned at an early age to cultivate his mind. This education gave him a unique skill set that served him well in future religious and political endeavors.

Given his birth in 1828, he must have entered seminary sometime in his late teens and exited in his twenties, during the time of the Mexican American War (1846-1848). Family lore contends that Vivero was on his way to being ordained a priest in Mexico City when he met Nicolasa Gómez in Contreras, a town on the outskirts of Mexico City.<sup>12</sup> The two married on October 29, 1857, in Santa Catarina Virgen y Mártir Catholic church in the Lagunilla neighborhood of Mexico City. A little over nine months later, the Viveros christened their first

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Interview). There is strong evidence that Clemente’s great uncle was Jose Vital Vivero, who became rector of the Royal and Pontifical Tridentine College Seminary of Monterrey and was interim governor of the diocese in 1799. See, D.R. Guajardo, *Slaves of Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico: Hundreds of Notary Documents* (Los Bexarenos Genealogical Society, 2010), 224; Robert E. Wright, “Popular and Official Religiosity: A Theoretical Analysis and a Case Study of Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, 1755-1857” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Berkeley, Calif, Graduate Theological Union, 1992), 441–42.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, “Clemente Abraham Vivero,” *Friends’ Review: A Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal (1847-1894)*, American Periodicals, 35, no. 15 (November 19, 1881): 230.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Lee, “Clerical Education in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: The Conciliar Seminaries of Mexico City and Guadalajara, 1821-1910,” *The Americas* 36, no. 4 (1980): 465–77.

<sup>12</sup> Aquilino Idar Interview.

child in that same church.<sup>13</sup> Clemente and Nicolasa had four more children, including Jovita Vivero, the eventual matriarch of the Idar family.<sup>14</sup> Clemente had clearly decided to abandon his future as a Catholic priest in the 1850s, yet was still nominally Catholic.

Vivero distanced himself from Catholicism not only for personal reasons, but also as a result of wider changes in the relationship between political ideologies and the Catholic faith in nineteenth-century Mexico. Vivero's colleague Samuel Purdie explained that Vivero left seminary, "[because] liberal views threw him into that chaotic party of patriots who were struggling for religious liberty."<sup>15</sup> What Purdie referenced was Mexico's mid-nineteenth century Liberal Party. The religious liberty they sought was part of a complex reform ideology.

#### *Clemente Vivero's Liberalism*

Clemente left the priesthood and married his wife in a Catholic church matrimony during a crucial moment in the history of the liberal reform movement in Mexico City. This was a time when liberalism and Catholicism were not incompatible. According to Purdie, Vivero was "in the group of liberals who gathered around Ignacio Comonfort in the first struggle for religious liberty, just before Juárez came to the front of political affairs."<sup>16</sup> The mention of Ignacio Comonfort placed Vivero among the liberal faction who rebelled against General Antonio López de Santa Anna in 1854. These men were part of a generation who, as historian Charles Hale explained, blamed the

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<sup>13</sup> "México matrimonio, 1570-1950," database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JHL7-RVQ>; 14 July 2015), Clemente Biberio and Nicolaza Gomez, 29 Oct 1857; citing Sta. Catarina V. Y Martir, Distrito Federal, México, reference p 120; FHL microfilm 36,033.

<sup>14</sup> The other four children were Emilia, Paz, Jovita, Zulema, Moises, and Rosa Vivero.

<sup>15</sup> Purdie was a foreign missionary for the American Evangelical Friends church who had begun his mission in 1871 in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The word "college" might imply a non-religious education, although Clemente was considered a potential priest by both Purdie and Aquilino Idar. Samuel Alexander Purdie, "Clemente Abraham Vivero," 225; Aquilino Interview.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

country's ills on the old hierarchical system which kept Indians, merchants, and the upper sectors of society divided and dependent on the traditional power brokers in Mexico—above all the Catholic church which owned the most land and was deeply enmeshed in the private lives of Mexican citizens.<sup>17</sup> Vivero was considered a liberal, yet it is important to qualify this observation.

The term “Liberal” in Mexico had various meanings throughout the nineteenth century. Within the liberal camp, moderate and radical factions differed on a number of key issues: individual liberties, freedom of the press, distribution of power (centralism or federalism), and the issue of popular democracy. They also had diverse views concerning the role of the Catholic church. While most liberals understood Mexico as a Catholic nation, they differed on issues such as whether the church should retain special tribunals and whether or not clerics should be eligible for election to Congress.<sup>18</sup>

Liberals were not inevitably opposed to the Catholic religion.<sup>19</sup> They were instead critical of the Catholic church as a corporate body. They believed that the church, as a powerful corporation, threatened a young nation that lacked a strong central state. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and France, Mexican liberals were torn between their desire to limit state power, and their more urgent need to erect a state power that could counterbalance the influence of long entrenched corporate bodies from the colonial period, most importantly the church.<sup>20</sup> Liberals like the famed Mexican thinker and politician José María Luis Mora believed that

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<sup>17</sup> Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853* (Yale University Press, 1968), 13–14.

<sup>18</sup> Brian R. Hamnett, “Liberalism Divided: Regional Politics and the National Project during the Mexican Restored Republic, 1867-1876,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (1996): 662.

<sup>19</sup> Hamnett, “Liberalism Divided,” 664.

<sup>20</sup> Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, “La dificultad del liberalismo mexicano,” *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, no. 18 (January 1, 2001), 84.

individuals needed to be protected from the church and the army, and that a strong state was needed to ensure this protection.<sup>21</sup> Vivero, as a liberal during the 1840s, might have been a Catholic with reformist ideas, but he was not necessarily anti-Catholic.

It is important to note that Vivero's liberal ideas during this period did not come from Protestantism. Protestants attempted to create small inroads into Mexico during this period, but these attempts were short lived. Between 1827 and 1830, Mora helped a Scottish colporteur (book seller) with the British and Foreign Bible Society, James Thomson, secure a commission to distribute Bibles in Mexico. Thomson reported to the British and Foreign Bible Society that "he sold 3,200 Bibles, 4,200 New Testaments, and 4,000 portions of scriptures in Mexico."<sup>22</sup> The Catholic hierarchy was quick to respond to the distribution of these texts; authorities promptly clamped down on Thomson's work and the Bible agent soon left Mexico.<sup>23</sup> However, Thomson was not the only Protestant entering the Mexican Republic. While Thomson was distributing Bibles, a Protestant movement was beginning in Mexican Texas with the arrival of Stephen F. Austin's settler colony in 1821.<sup>24</sup> Many of these settlers came from Tennessee and Alabama, and as part of their contract with the Mexican government were required to convert to Catholicism.

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<sup>21</sup> Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853*, 114.

<sup>22</sup> International Conference on Baptist Studies, Ian M Randall, and Anthony R Cross, eds., *Baptists and Mission: Papers from the Fourth International Conference on Baptist Studies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 150.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes: sociedades protestantes y Revolución en México, 1872-1911* (México, D.F: Fondo de Cultura Económica El Colegio de México, 1989), 27; International Conference on Baptist Studies, Randall, and Cross, *Baptists and Mission*, 150.

<sup>24</sup>In 1829 Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, Summer Bacon, was preaching in the region and was soon approved by the American Bible Society to supply English and Spanish Bibles to the area Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea La Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900* (Denton, Tex: University of North Texas Press, 2006), 51.

Yet they often privately retained their Protestantism.<sup>25</sup> After the creation of an independent Texas Republic in 1836, Protestants came out of their secret missions and into the light. By the late 1830s, Southern Baptists and the Presbyterian church of the United States were present in Texas and expressed interest in Mexico, but none took any serious action. Outside of Thomson few, if any, Protestant missionaries came to Mexico until after the Mexican American War. Therefore, Vivero's liberalism in the 1850s, operated within a Catholic—not Protestant--sphere of influence.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Catholics like Vivero were forced to engage with the “church question,” which became a litmus test of one's ideological position within the liberal spectrum.<sup>26</sup> Vivero's education positioned him to participate in Mexico's reform movement, though where Vivero stood on the liberal spectrum between moderate and radical is unclear. Purdie stated that, “[Vivero's] pen was brought into use, and his friendly relations with editors opened up before him a literary instead of a military career.”<sup>27</sup> As part of Mexico's editorial world he was undoubtedly debating and discussing the politics of the day. Even in seminary he likely would have been exposed to some version of liberal thought. Prior to the shift towards ultramontane, conservative Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have explained that a certain sector of the laity promoted a more liberal version of Catholicism. This laity,

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<sup>25</sup>For example, the Menefee, White, and Sutherland families of Alabama, by way of Tennessee, remained Methodist despite the prohibition of Protestantism in Mexican Texas. They formed a “secret Methodist mission in their home” relying on “saddlebag preachers” who visited central Texas to minister to the family. See, Anne Sutherland, *The Robertsons, the Sutherlands, and the Making of Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006), 68–71. According to Howard Miller, Stephen F. Austin continued to “ask” all residents to convert to Catholicism well into the early 1830s. See, Howard Miller, “Stephen F. Austin and the Anglo-Texan Response to the Religious Establishment in Mexico, 1821-1836,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (January 1988): 289.

<sup>26</sup> Hamnett, “Liberalism Divided,” 664.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, “Clemente Abraham Vivero.”

especially in Mexico City, embraced Enlightenment ideals and promoted piety, sometimes even highlighting the early church beliefs in the centrality of the Bible, the church council's authority over the Vatican, and the significance of freedom of conscious.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Vivero was perhaps already questioning Catholic hierarchy within the seminary.

Key to understanding Vivero's liberalism during this period was the moderate position taken by the liberal government that assumed power in 1854. In that year, a loosely tied group of liberals—including Ignacio Comonfort and Juan N. Álvarez—came into power. They proposed limiting the church's influence, but like their predecessors differed on how much reform was needed. A series of moderate measures were taken between 1855 and 1857. The *Ley Juárez* (1855), abolished the ecclesiastic and military *fueros*—the right of the military and the clergy to be tried in their own special courts. The *Ley Lerdo* (1856) placed restrictions on the rights of corporate bodies to own land. While seemingly anti-clerical, both laws were moderate. For example, the *Ley Juárez* did not abolish the special courts, rather it only limited what could be tried in them (only matters of canon or military law). And the *Ley Lerdo* compelled the church to sell its unused land but did not outright confiscate it or its wealth, which was, at the time, overwhelmingly wrapped up in capital investments.<sup>29</sup> In not abolishing the courts and refusing to attack church wealth, the two measures took a moderate approach to reform. Similarly, the Constitution of 1857 adopted measures aimed at nudging society towards a modern system of government by attacking what liberal politicians believed were only the worst aspects of church power.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the Liberal

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<sup>28</sup> Pamela Voekel, "Liberal Religion: The Schism of 1861," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 82.

<sup>29</sup> Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *Triumphs and Tragedy: A History of the Mexican People*. (New York: Norton, 1994), 228.

<sup>30</sup>The Constitution stated that, "Federal authorities shall have the exclusive power to exercise, in matters of religious worship and outward ecclesiastic forms, such intervention as by law." It also

government's measures allowed for people like Vivero to support moderate reform while remaining faithful to Catholicism.

The Catholic church, however, did not view the *Ley Juárez*, the *Ley Lerdo*, or the Constitution of 1857 as moderate measures. In December of 1856, Pope Pius IX spoke out against the decrees and ordered them “null and void.”<sup>31</sup> Three months later, in March 1857, Archbishop of Mexico, José Lázaro de Garza y Ballesteros warned that any persons who purchased church land freed by the *Ley Lerdo* would face excommunication.<sup>32</sup> The following month, the upper clergy in Mexico threatened excommunication to any public servant who pledged allegiance to the new Constitution as required by the government.<sup>33</sup> In order to make sure that their clergy remained loyal, the Vatican threatened to excommunicate any Catholic priest who supported these liberal reforms. By 1857, the Vatican's position was clear: any person or priest supporting the Constitution risked becoming an enemy of the church.

In December of 1857, opponents of the liberal Constitution launched the *Plan de Tacubaya* in order to expel the liberal regime then in power. A less moderate group of liberals rallied around Benito Juárez, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and consequently, the legal successor to the presidency under the Constitution of 1857. The ensuing 19-month brutal civil war forced liberals to stake out a firm position concerning the role of the church in Mexican society.

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established freedom of public instruction, speech, and the press and guaranteed that man's inalienable rights of freedom could not be obstructed by religious duty. H. N. Branch and L. S. Rowe, “The Mexican Constitution of 1917 Compared with The Constitution of 1857,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 71 (1917): i-116.

<sup>31</sup> Ruiz, *Triumphs and Tragedy*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Hamnett, “The Commonfort Presidency, 1855-1857,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Special Issue: Mexican Politics in the Nineteenth Century, 15, no. 1 (1996): 91.

Meanwhile, in the Vivero household, Clemente and Jovita had their second daughter, Emilia, who was also christened in a Catholic church in 1861.<sup>34</sup> By the 1860s, Clemente was still practicing Catholicism yet his liberal views were facing an increasingly polarized religious and political environment. Even within this chaotic context, where members of the civil government opposed the authority of the church, there still existed space to be a committed liberal and a committed Catholic.

*Clemente Vivero's and the Constitutionalist Priests of Mexico*

The archival record does not indicate where Vivero stood on the religious question in 1861. What we do know is that by 1872, he was a known associate of Manuel Aguas—the famed Mexico City priest turned Protestant. Aguas was a staunch Catholic up until 1868 when he began questioning his faith. He was not alone. In Mexico City, a group of Catholic priests became critical of what they believed was the Roman Catholic church's participation in the *Plan de Tacubaya*, and as a result rallied around Juárez.<sup>35</sup> They have been labeled by historians as “Constitutionalist Priests” for their support of Benito Juárez and the Mexican Constitution of 1857.

The Constitutionalist Priests represented an alternative future for Catholicism in Mexico. They imagined a new, Mexican, Catholic church that was less hierarchical and guided by an accessible liturgy that was still faithful to Catholicism's core beliefs. As historian Pamela Voeckel explains, “in place of Romish excess they envisioned not a secular society but a godly

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<sup>34</sup> "México bautismos, 1560-1950," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NBP9-H6V> : 11 February 2018), Clemente Vivero in entry for Emiliana Vivero Gómez, 15 August 1861; citing SAN ISIDRO DE OCAMPO, GUANAJUATO, MEXICO, reference ; FHL microfilm 646,899.

<sup>35</sup> Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 14.

alternative.”<sup>36</sup> More specifically, they wanted to establish a reformed Catholic church that was “national, liturgic, and [had] its foundation laid in the Scriptures and its Apostolic pattern.”<sup>37</sup> These priests wanted to reform the church, not abolish it. Their presence within the history of liberalism in Mexico provides us with a better assessment of the options a theologically trained liberal like Vivero had in Mexico during this period.

The core of this group came together in 1859. They received tacit support from Benito Juárez who reached out to them via Melchor Ocampo in October of the same year. Juárez told them:

The government will make sure to reward your work in proportion to the utility we believe the nation will receive from it, and the government will make sure to compensate all the faithful priests who believe in the mission of peace.<sup>38</sup>

Juárez named the Constitutionalist Priests agents of the government so that they could begin the religious work of creating an independent and Mexican, Catholic church. When Juárez and his Liberal party returned to Mexico City on January 1, 1860, they provided the priests with three places of worship in the capital city.

In addition to helping the Constitutionalist Priests, Juárez instituted a series of reforms attacking the Catholic church.<sup>39</sup> He secularized cemeteries, birth registrations, and marriages. He forbade religious processions in public spaces and suppressed monastic orders. Most importantly,

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<sup>36</sup> Pamela Voekel, “Liberal Religion: The Schism of 1861,” 78.

<sup>37</sup> Susana Chow Pangtay, *Church Work in Mexico* (New York: The League in Aid of the Mexican Branch of the church, 1881), 74; as quoted in, Deborah Jo Baldwin, “Variation Within the Vanguard: Protestants and the Mexican Revolution” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1979), 38.

<sup>38</sup> Correspondence from Melchor Ocampo to Rafael Díaz Martínez, 22 February 1861, Episcopal Church Archive, Austin, Texas, as quoted in, Deborah Jo Baldwin, “Variation within the Vanguard,” 40.

<sup>39</sup> Pamela Voekel, “Liberal Religion: The Schism of 1861,” 85.

he forced the Church to sell much of its land. After 1860, the liberal government under Juárez made its intentions clear: Mexico's church and state were to be completely separate. These actions eventually led to a break with the Vatican in 1860. As the moderate position towards the Catholic church became untenable, religious tolerance was incorporated into the new liberal Constitution.

The incorporation of religious tolerance coincided and was constitutive of the work Protestant missionaries were conducting in Mexico. As stated earlier, U.S. Protestant religious institutions made few attempts to enter Mexico before the 1860s. One exception was Melinda Rankin, one of the most important Protestant missionaries to enter Mexico. Rankin first learned of Mexico's religious practices from soldiers returning from the Mexican American War. From them, she learned of "a country right upon our border from which the light of the Bible had been excluded for centuries...a pure Christianity had never penetrated these dark regions."<sup>40</sup> In 1852, she responded to this apparent darkness by establishing a small Bible study group in the border city of Brownsville, Texas. Because Mexico was still legally a Catholic nation during this period, she could not establish Protestant churches. Instead, Rankin's early work involved hiring colporteurs to distribute Bibles in the Catholic country for \$30 per month.<sup>41</sup> Colporteurs were important messengers for Protestant missionaries who emphasized spreading the Gospel through Spanish-language Bibles and books with religious themes. They were integral to a Protestant faith that believed that the word of God could be understood directly without intermediaries. After 1860, she took advantage of Benito Juárez's new position towards the Catholic church, and she, along with Baptist Irishman, James Hickey, and another Baptist, Thomas Westrup, set up Bible studies,

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<sup>40</sup> Melinda Rankin, *Twenty Years Among the Mexicans: A Narrative of Missionary Labor* (Chase and Hall, 1875), 22.

<sup>41</sup> Deborah Jo Baldwin, "Variation within the Vanguard," 56.

an active colportage, and a “Society of Evangelization” in Monterrey, Mexico.<sup>42</sup> The Protestant missionary movement in Mexico during this period was small and for Catholics like Vivero, the Constitutionalist priests still provided an alternative possibility for Catholic worship.

In 1864, the various groups associated with the Constitutionalist priests decided to nominally unite and create the Mexican church of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> By the 1860s, they had at least 100 lower clergy in their ranks, amounting to approximately 3 percent of the 3,189 secular and regular clergy in all of Mexico.<sup>44</sup> But the group faced an uphill battle.<sup>45</sup> According to scholars who have studied the group, they failed for myriad reasons: the upper clergy remained united in their opposition and none of its members joined the movement, they lacked the funds to maintain the church, and once denounced by the Vatican, they never received the support of the Mexican people as a whole.<sup>46</sup> As a result, in 1865 the Constitutionalist priest Manuel Aguilar reached out to the Episcopal church in the United States in the hope of gaining support for the Mexican church of Jesus Christ. In 1869, Episcopal church representatives decided not to aid the church of Jesus Christ. But in that same year, the Episcopal minister H.C. Riley came to Mexico on his own volition and began to work with the Constitutionalist priests.

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<sup>42</sup> International Conference on Baptist Studies, Randall, and Cross, *Baptists and Mission*, 153.

<sup>43</sup> The question of how religion would be practiced remained during this period. Priests from different locales, individually proposed plans for an independent church. In 1861, Father Ramón Lozano from Santa Bárbara, Tamaulipas, called for a national church based on the Scriptures and in 1862, Sostenes Juárez and Agustín Palacios proposed the creation of a Mexican church based on Reformist principles. See, Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Pamela Voekel, “Liberal Religion: The Schism of 1861,” 90.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes: sociedades protestantes y la Revolución en México, 1872-1922*, 32; Ruiz, *Triumphs and Tragedy*, 238.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-48; Deborah Jo Baldwin, “Variation within the Vanguard,” 41.

It was in this moment that Mexican liberalism, Protestantism, and the Constitutionalist priest movements converged. Sometime around 1868, Manuel Aguas obtained a copy of a Spanish translation of a religious tract titled, “True Liberty” by Canon Ryle. The tract was most likely distributed by Protestant colporteurs working for the American Tract Society. Aguas claimed that upon reading the tract, he began to question the Catholic faith.<sup>47</sup> He decided to attend a public Protestant sermon being conducted in a hall on San Juan de Letrán street in Mexico City, an event that was only possible after the Liberal reform movement. In the hall, Reverend H.C. Riley was preaching for adherents of the church of Jesus Christ. According to Aguas, [Riley’s voice] “filled me with comfort...to hear him speak of Jesus and his precious blood, the liturgy and hymns, which the congregation used, enchanted me... [these were] Christian emotions that I had never felt in the Roman sect.”<sup>48</sup> Upon hearing Riley’s words, Aguas began to believe that the true word of God lay outside the Catholic faith. He soon connected with Riley and the two became allies.

In the spring of 1871, Aguas caused a great scandal in Mexico City when he publicly converted to Protestantism.<sup>49</sup> He was known as a staunch anti-Protestant as well as a renowned priest within the Catholic church. Before his conversion, he was made official confessor of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City and quite regularly conducted mass before the archbishop of his region. Undoubtedly, his association with the church of Jesus Christ was a great win for the Constitutionalist priests and a blow to the Catholic church hierarchy in Mexico City. But even with Aguas’ conversion, the church of Jesus Christ was still in need of institutional support that the

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<sup>47</sup> Manuel Aguas, “Correspondence from Manuel Aguas” (New York: T. Whittaker, Publisher and Bookseller No. 2, Bible House, October 1871). From Project Canterbury, accessed January 10, 2021 <http://anglicanhistory.org/mx/aguas1871.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Deborah Jo Baldwin, “Variation within the Vanguard,” 74.

Juárez government was financially incapable of providing. With the church of Jesus Christ's downward trajectory, Aguas and many of the adherents decided a connection with Protestantism was the only way the church would survive.<sup>50</sup>

It was during this period that Aguas and Vivero became acquainted. By 1869, Vivero was living in San Luis Potosí where the 41-year-old had a home with his wife and three daughters. He held minor positions within the city government and sold lottery tickets.<sup>51</sup> How and where Vivero met Aguas is unknown. It is possible that the two were friends in the Seminary, or that they met after each became Protestant. According to Purdie, Vivero visited Aguas in Mexico City, a fact corroborated by Presbyterian missionary, Reverend John Beveridge.<sup>52</sup> From Beveridge we also learn that Clemente converted to Protestantism around the same time as Manuel Aguas. According to Beveridge, "Señor Vivero professes to have been but lately converted to Protestantism and had just returned from a visit to Padre Aguas in Mexico, from whom he had obtained a box of Bibles."<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Beveridge relayed that Vivero "was a man of some talent and had written several articles for the *Antorcha*." The paper he referenced was *La Antorcha Evangélica*, a Protestant publication created in 1869 by Juan Amador and Severo Cosío in Villa de Cos, Zacatecas. The paper was related to the work of Protestant missionaries, Maxwell Phillips and H.C. Thomson. Vivero, according to Beveridge, "appear[ed] very desirous of establishing a Protestant congregation in San Luis." From this account we learn that by 1872, Vivero was active within a

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<sup>50</sup> Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, "Clemente Abraham Vivero"; "Honradez de un guarda," *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, June 23, 1870.

<sup>52</sup> American and Foreign Christian Union, *The Christian World: The Magazine of the American and Foreign Christian Union*, v. 23 (The Union., 1872), 349–52.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

Protestant network with both Mexican and U.S. adherents and that he was eager to become a leader within the Protestant movement.

On October 18, 1872, a few months after Vivero met with Aguas in Mexico City, Aguas passed away causing upheaval within the church of Jesus Christ. Later that year, Aguas' ally, Reverend H.C. Riley, established a connection with the Episcopal church of the United States. The Episcopal church agreed that "the Mexican Branch of the Catholic church" was to be made a foreign church which would receive the "nursing care of the Protestant Episcopal church of the United States, until [it] shall attain a sufficiency in its Episcopate for the administration of its own affairs."<sup>54</sup> The connection between the Mexican church of Jesus Christ and the U.S. Episcopal church signaled an end to the idea of an independent, reformed Catholic church in Mexico.

Through Vivero's experience within this period of reform, we see how liberal views could shift and accommodate different positions towards the Catholic church. The church's response to liberal reforms undoubtedly caused many to radicalize in their beliefs. Vivero, like many Mexicans, was forced to wrestle with the "church" question. His views shifted during this period, but so too did the sociopolitical ground beneath him. At the same time that liberal reforms were being instituted, a Protestant missionary movement was forming in Mexico and Vivero became a member of this movement. Vivero's decision to abandon Catholicism in favor of Protestantism was not only about faith. During this moment, Protestantism aligned more closely with his liberal vision of society and was therefore a better vehicle for his evolving personal beliefs. As historian Deborah Baldwin has shown, Protestantism in Mexico was an ideology that "helped rationalize

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<sup>54</sup> Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change*, 62.

the critiques Mexicans had of traditional controls, hierarchical status, and corporate privilege.”<sup>55</sup> For the moment, Protestantism was the ideology that fit Vivero’s needs and supported his critiques of the Catholic church.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Clemente Vivero and Protestantism*

By 1872, Vivero had a small Protestant reading group loosely affiliated with Presbyterianism in San Luis Potosí.<sup>57</sup> He remained connected to San Luis Potosí during the remainder of his life and his family lived there after Vivero’s death in 1881. Yet during the 1870s, Vivero was forced to leave the region during a reignited battle between church and state. It was the violence from this era that led Vivero to radicalize in his beliefs and to search for an alternative home in the border region of south Texas and northern Mexico.

Vivero was living in San Luis Potosí in 1872 but traveling widely throughout Mexico during this period selling books as a Protestant colporteur. This job allowed him to establish connections with people in Aguascalientes and Zacatecas that added to his network of acquaintances in Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, and the capital city. Vivero was also a contributor to the protestant pamphlet titled *La Antorcha Evangélica*. As a colporteur and part-time journalist for Protestant missionaries, Vivero had access to important literary works and a network of editors with ties to the U.S. and Mexico. At this time, he was also beginning to develop a talent for delivering passionate sermons.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>56</sup> This idea is also greatly influenced by Vicki L. Ruiz’ theory of “cultural coalescence.” In the introduction to her book she writes, “immigrants and their children pick, borrow, retain, and create distinctive cultural forms.” Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xvi.

<sup>57</sup> “Inauguración de un templo en San Luis Potosí,” *El Faro*, September 1, 1894, 135.

One such sermon marked a turning point in Vivero's life. On February 16, 1873, at 10:30 in the morning in San Luis Potosí, Vivero decided to host a rather conspicuous Protestant Bible meeting in his home.<sup>58</sup> The meeting was attended by Protestant missionary Reverend Henry C. Thompson, Faustino Robledo, and Francisco Padierna. Vivero's sermon sparked the ire of an angry mob of some 300 men and women who came to the house of Vivero screaming for the "devil priest to come out so that they could kill him."<sup>59</sup> Displaying the zealous faith he would become famous for, Vivero walked outside in front of the mob, Bible in hand, and began reading scripture. Rocks came flying at Vivero and soon he made haste for a city official's office, in part to escape the mob but also to draw attention away from his home where his family and friends remained. Eventually, with the help of local police, the mob was dispersed and Vivero returned home. The event became famous in Protestant circles. To this day, a version of this story remains as part of the founding narrative of San Luis Potosí's Presbyterian church, Templo Sión.<sup>60</sup> This was not an isolated event; in subsequent years, Vivero had to flee numerous cities for his attempts at public Protestant worship.

The violence perpetrated against Vivero was connected to a reignited battle between the Mexican state and the Catholic church. Upon his return to power in 1867, Juárez sought to salvage the relationship between church and state through reconciliation. Yet his death in July of 1872 terminated this possibility.<sup>61</sup> His successor, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, took a different approach. On September 23, 1873, he incorporated Juárez's anti-clerical reform laws into the Constitution and

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<sup>58</sup> Francisco Padierna, "Datos para la historia," *El Faro*, December 15, 1892.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*; "Nuestra historia," Templo Sión, accessed February 1, 2020, <http://www.inpsion.com/nuestraHistoria.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Hamnett, "Liberalism Divided, 664–65.

in response, the Catholic church went on a mission to “re-evangelize the countryside.”<sup>62</sup> The renewed conflict between church and government had far-reaching consequences that influenced Vivero’s life. Given his recent attack and the renewed animosity between church and state, he was forced to consider alternative locales to practice his newly acquired faith.

Leaving San Luis Potosí became imperative after 1874, when Vivero learned of the brutal assassination of a U.S. Protestant missionary. A little over a year after Vivero’s attack, on March 2, 1874, John L. Stevens, was murdered in Jalisco, Mexico. A recently ordained Baptist minister who arrived in Guadalajara on September 19, 1872, Stevens was assigned a position in the rural city of Ahualulco, Jalisco. On New Year’s Eve, of 1873, he was happy to report the success he had in selling religious literature: “since I came here, over two hundred Bibles, Testaments, Tracts, Evangels, etc., etc. have been sold and I am waiting for more from Mexico... The first few days we met some opposition; the doors were defaced, stones were thrown at the windows, and there was shouting during the speaking. But all this has entirely ceased; I sleep as safely as in California.”<sup>63</sup> But the opposition to Protestantism in Ahualulco only increased, as shown three months later through missionary reports:

At two o’clock, A.M., on the second instant, the house of Rev. Mr. Stevens was assaulted by a mob, composed of about two hundred persons, crying, ‘Long live the curate, death to the Protestants.’...Stevens was brutally assassinated; his head was severed into several parts, and his body was very much mutilated...The originator of this horrible misfortune...is the curate, whose exact words, pronounced the previous day (Sunday) in the pulpit, were: ‘The tree that bears bad fruit should be cut down.’<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> According to Brian Hamnett, these included, “religious tolerance (which protected non-Catholic religions in Mexico), civil marriage contracts, prohibition of the acquisition of landed property or mortgages by religious institutions, removal of the oath of the crucifix, the invalidation of monastic vows [on the grounds that they violated individual liberties], and the prohibition of the foundation of new orders.” Hamnett, "Liberalism Divided," 665.

<sup>63</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *Missionary Herald*, v. 70-71, 1874, 137–40.

<sup>64</sup> Missions, *Missionary Herald*, 137–38.

Vivero undoubtedly recognized the similarities between his attack and that of the U.S. missionary and probably saw in Stephen's death a fate that could befall him.

Vivero, by this time, had access to a robust network of Protestant missionaries and allies thanks to his work as a colporteur and newspaper contributor. The actions taken by the Lerdo de Tejada government sparked a new wave of violence against Protestants in Mexico. The attack against Vivero in February 1873 and the assassination of Stephens in March of the following year, both had a chilling effect on the middle-aged preacher. As a result, in 1874, Vivero left San Luis Potosí in search of a new place to practice his faith. From these incidents we also begin to understand where the seeds of Vivero's anticlericalism were rooted. In both instances, local priests were assumed to be responsible for the mob violence and one can see within Vivero a growing animosity towards fanatical priests.

#### *Clemente Vivero Comes to the Border*

The border region had long been an important post for Protestant missionaries who were interested in Mexico. Melinda Rankin and James Hickey established Bible study groups in the twin border cities of Brownsville and Matamoros during the mid-nineteenth century. The Methodist Episcopal church-South (MECS) was ministering to Texas' Spanish-Speaking population by 1859. And in 1869, Samuel A. Purdie helped the church of Friends Quaker society start a mission directly across Brownsville, Texas in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Purdie and the church of Friends introduced one of the first printing presses to the state of Tamaulipas shortly after the mission was established. They published a Protestant publication titled *El Ramo de Olivo*. As stated earlier, Clemente Vivero was well known in Protestant editorial circles and as a colporteur had access to much of the literature in circulation in Mexico. At some point he came across *El Ramo de Olivo* and Vivero

sought out the publication's locale. He arrived in Matamoros in 1875 and was soon lending his editorial services to the mission and preaching the gospel.

It was in this setting that Vivero developed a reputation as an extraordinary preacher. According to Purdie, Vivero was an arresting figure, "a singular personage in every respect, for although of a dark Indian cast of countenance, he was rather tall and slender, his large black eyes seemed to betray an ancestry which terminated among the Moors of Spain, his high forehead gave him an intelligent look."<sup>65</sup> Vivero's tall, dark appearance was made all the more commanding due to physical disfigurements he received during his work as a colporteur and minister in Mexico. He was said to have, "several protuberances which would alarm a phrenologist and which seem to have resulted from blows caused by severe accidents in mining and the attacks of his persecutors."<sup>66</sup> Vivero's appearance was accentuated by his passionate tone, which was unsettling for some. According to Purdie there was, "something wild in the expression of his eye, and he was grotesque in his outward appearance."<sup>67</sup>

Vivero's ability as a preacher was strengthened by his exceptional education, oratorical prowess, and his ability to use past experiences to stir his audience and persuade them to join the Protestant faith.<sup>68</sup> He held his audiences' attention by artfully utilizing his passionate tone to recount Mexico's recent ideological battles. A witness to one of his sermons explained that Vivero

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, *Memories of Angela Aguilar de Mascorro, and Sketches of the Friends' Mexican Mission* (Chicago, IL: Publishing Association of Friends, 1885), 47. It should be noted that Purdie's description of Clemente Vivero contrasts with his grandson Aquilino's recollection of his father as a "blonde [perhaps red], blue-eyed" European. See, Aquilino Idar Interview.

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, *Memories of Angela Aguilar de Mascorro, and Sketches of the Friends' Mexican Mission*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, "Clemente Abraham Vivero," 245.

<sup>68</sup> Purdie, *Memories of Angela Aguilar de Mascorro*, 47.

could “bring out in detail those political moments and historic events connected with the long struggle for religious liberty in which he had taken an active part...[and to] to bear the whole audience along with him in his advocacy of the Reform movement.”<sup>69</sup> The observation underscores the importance of his active participation in Mexico’s political battles and was typical of the kind of enthusiasm he engendered toward the Mexican Reform movement as a whole among his listeners. Vivero connected the ideals of the Mexican reform movement with the tenets of Protestantism—Mexican reformers wanted to remove Antonio López de Santa Anna from power and free Mexican people from the power of the church, military, and wealthy landowners. Protestantism offered an alternative to Catholicism in Mexico thereby weakening the power of the Catholic Church.

Purdie provided a description of one of Vivero’s sermons and with this description we can observe Vivero’s skill as a preacher. On this particular occasion, “he read a part of his discourse, now and then launching out in earnest denunciations of the errors and abominations of Romanism and the horrid persecutions they had inflicted on Protestants.”<sup>70</sup> With the recent attacks on both he and his associates, he informed the audience about the, “long list of martyrs in different epochs, closing with a touching description of the assassination of John L. Stevens at Ahualulco.” Combining the audience’s commitment to Mexico with his emotional appeal, he called for the audience to “cleanse their souls from having part [*sic*] in the blood of Stephens by leaving the church of Rome” and joining the Protestant movement which was in “perfect harmony with the existing laws of the country, and the best interests of the people.” Vivero’s words so moved audience member Angela Aguilar y Zuñiga, she decided to leave the Catholic church and adhere

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

“to the pure Gospel of Christ” so that she could “clear her own soul from any acquiescence in the death of Stephens [*sic*].”<sup>71</sup> Vivero drew on his past, with charisma and eloquence, to persuade his audience.

With his command of history and oratorical flair, the minister impressed the *norteño* congregants in Matamoros. Vivero’s charisma and eloquence were important traits to have for a religion focused on conversion through preaching. Protestants were keen on finding “native missionaries” to do their work, envisioning a Mexican future in which schools and churches were run by Protestant Mexicans. Word of Vivero’s skill spread throughout the Protestant community and eventually reached Alexander H. Sutherland, head of the Methodist Episcopal Church-South’s West Texas Conference. Sutherland was responsible for the Spanish-speaking Methodist work in Texas which was gaining momentum by the mid-nineteenth century. In 1859, the Methodist Episcopal Church-South (MECS) was created as Texas’s governing body to minister to the Spanish-speaking population in the lower Rio Grande Valley.<sup>72</sup> The mission of Protestants in the Southwest was to convert Mexicans so that they could one day also become agents of God’s word spreading Protestant teachings and values. The mission was such a success amongst the Spanish-speaking population that in 1874 that the MECS created a district that was responsible for ministering to the Spanish-speaking region. Sutherland was chosen to lead this missionary work in northern Mexico and southern Texas. In October 1875, Sutherland asked Vivero to speak to MECS members at a conference in San Antonio. Vivero left Matamoros for the conference in the company of another ex-Catholic, Alejo Hernández, who was the first Mexican minister ordained

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 147.

in the MECS. Clemente Vivero, the former priest-in-training, liberal, Protestant colporteur was on his way to becoming an official Methodist minister.

But his future as a Protestant minister met the same fate as his future as a Catholic priest. According to MECS records, in 1875, Vivero was “admitted to trial” which meant he was being considered by Methodist church leaders to receive the official title of “minister.”<sup>73</sup> The next step towards becoming an official minister was to be “admitted to full connection.” But during 1876 and 1877, he remained “on trial.”<sup>74</sup> Then in 1878, the records indicate that he withdrew from consideration “at his own request,” and Clemente A. Vivero was “discontinued.”<sup>75</sup> For unknown reasons, he never became an official Methodist minister, though his descendants provided some clues.

According to family lore, Vivero resented never becoming an official Methodist minister, raising questions as to whether he voluntarily discontinued his trial or was told he would never be admitted. Vivero was convinced that his ability to speak English and Spanish coupled with his earlier mastery of Greek and Latin made him a worthy candidate and believed that the only reason he was never admitted was due to his prior Catholic faith.<sup>76</sup> However, by 1871, the MECS had already admitted a former Catholic Mexican as an official minister—the aforementioned Alejo

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<sup>73</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South for the Year 1875* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1875), 266.

<sup>74</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South for the Year 1876* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1883), 108; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South for the Year 1878* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884), 109.

<sup>75</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South for the Year 1878*, 119.

<sup>76</sup> Aquilino Idar Interview.

Hernández.<sup>77</sup> Like Vivero, Hernández had also attended a Catholic seminary before converting to Protestantism. The Methodist delegation clearly was not opposed to allowing ex-Catholics into their ranks. In fact, one could say their entire mission in the Spanish-speaking region was built on the foundation of finding Catholic converts to become native ministers. Perhaps Vivero's temperament worried the ministers in the same way it seemed to worry Purdie.

Nevertheless, shortly after the conference of October 1875, Vivero moved to Rio Grande City, a town not far from Brownsville and Matamoros. At some point between 1875 and 1881, Vivero met the twenty-one-year old Nicasio Idar.<sup>78</sup> Nicasio was traveling throughout northern Mexico and south Texas during this period, working odd jobs that brought him to Rio Grande City. He might have attended a Protestant meeting because family lore holds that he first met Vivero's daughter Jovita, while she was singing in a church choir. He, like most of the people who met Vivero was undoubtedly impressed by the remarkable figure. According to Nicasio's son, Vivero took Nicasio under his wing, introduced him to his network of Protestants, and helped him learn English. Nicasio was a man from a small town in Texas who was now allied with Vivero, a bibliophile who was known to quote passages "in Spanish, and ...Latin" and could "converse for hours, citing authorities, mentioning the dates and the minute details of all the great political and religious movements in Mexico, and even many of those of the old world."<sup>79</sup> We can only imagine the knowledge and life experiences Vivero shared with Nicasio.

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<sup>77</sup>Handbook of Texas Online, Isaiah Tadlock, "Hernández, Alejo," accessed March 08, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhern>. Uploaded on May 17, 2016. Modified on May 31, 2016. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>78</sup> Aquilino Idar Interview, 7; Margo Gutiérrez, Eduardo Idar Jr., Tape, March 7, 1991, Benson Latin American Collection.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, "Clemente Abraham Vivero," 245.

In addition, Vivero likely served as a surrogate parent for Nicasio. Nicasio was never close to his own parents after he left home. In fact, the only story Nicasio's son Aquilino had of his paternal grandfather was of a meeting sometime between 1883 and 1895 in Monterey, Mexico when Nicasio's estranged father, Manuel Idar, visited his son. The encounter was allegedly curt and confrontational. In the same interview, Aquilino explained that Nicasio did not speak much of his mother. He speculated that this might have been because she "sold him to these cowboys in Corpus Christi for one hundred dollars when he was fourteen years old."<sup>80</sup> Nicasio apparently resented being hired-out by his mother to work on a cattle drive. Given these facts, one can safely assume Nicasio's parents did not play a major role in his life after his teenage years.

However, through Vivero, Nicasio gained access to education, a network of Protestant missionaries and editors, and perhaps even a father figure. Nonetheless, the friendship between the two men ended in 1881 when Vivero died.<sup>81</sup> Shortly after Vivero's death, on March 19, 1882, Nicasio married Vivero's fifteen-year-old daughter Jovita.<sup>82</sup> The child-bride grew up to be a natural leader like her father. She was strong-willed and possessed a strong command of the written word.<sup>83</sup> The couple named their first son after Vivero, Clemente, and raised almost all their children as Protestants.<sup>84</sup> Nicasio, a man with limited formal education became a journalist, like his father-in-law, and was known to hold long eloquent conversations where he would blend

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<sup>80</sup> Aquilino Idar Interview.

<sup>81</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, "Clemente Abraham Vivero," 245.

<sup>82</sup> "Texas Marriages, 1837-1973,"

database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:V2MF-VWW> : 5 December 2014), Nicasio Ydar and Jovita Vibera, 19 Mar 1882; citing , Webb, Texas, , reference ; FHL microfilm 1,017,222.

<sup>83</sup> Deborah Wing-Leonard, "Jovita's Legacy: Gender and Women's Agency in a South Texas Family in the Early Twentieth Century" (University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2010), 15–34.

<sup>84</sup> See, Handbook of Texas Online, John H. McNeely, "Holding Institute," Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

history, politics, and philosophy, just like his father-in-law.

By the end of Vivero's life, he was fiercely anti-clerical, as evidenced by the poem quoted at the beginning of this chapter titled, "The Fanatical Roman Catholic Cleric." In the poem, Vivero described a fanatical cleric who caused violence and tumult with his extreme preaching—his "disgusting slime" in Vivero's words. This view was undoubtedly a product of his long and complex relationship with the Catholic church which included violent episodes. But it is important to remember that he also had a less violent, but equally important, schism with the Methodist Episcopal Church-South. By the end of his life, Vivero had adopted a diversity of beliefs through experiences and clashes with different church hierarchies—strict Catholicism, reformed Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Quakerism, and Methodism. These experiences undoubtedly informed the way he discussed religion with his daughter and future son-in-law.

#### *Clemente Vivero's Influence on La Crónica*

Vivero died in 1881, but his legacy lived on in the pages of his son-in-law's newspaper *La Crónica*, a weekly Spanish periodical from Laredo, Texas. As early as 1895, Nicasio was publishing *La Crónica*, and by 1909, the eldest Idar siblings were writing articles for the publication while the rest of the family contributed to its production.<sup>85</sup> The paper was owned and edited by "Idar é Hijos" with Nicasio's oldest children, Clemente, Jovita, and Eduardo heavily involved in the editorial process. Even the youngest children were involved in the family business as delivery boys who

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<sup>85</sup>In, "Caución para no publicar injurias," *La Voz de México*, August 12, 1895, Nicasio is accused of libel in Laredo, Texas; and in, [untitled], *The Chaparral*, February 18, 1899, Nicasio is referred to as editor of *La Crónica* newspaper, quoted from, José E. Limón, "El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Contemporary Chicanismo," in *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Francisco H. Vázquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), footnote 12; See, Nicasio Idar, "El primer año de vida," *La Crónica*, January 8, 1910.

made sure the paper was received by Laredo's paying subscribers.<sup>86</sup> The Idar family's oversight and control of the periodical allows us to connect the ideology being espoused in the paper with that of the family.

The paper ran from 1909 to 1914, yet there are only two years' worth of articles currently available in public archives—1910 and 1911. These two years, however, were pivotal in the south Texas-northern Mexico border region, as massive investment and an influx of newcomers changed the region's social dynamics. The Idars became leaders in the border community during this turbulent period and through the content of the paper, we can observe the vestiges of Clemente Vivero's social, political, and religious ideological influences.

The Idar family published articles that mirrored Vivero's liberal views. The family was critical of rigid hierarchies and strict Catholic dogma and battled against it by appealing to reason. This commitment was evident in a recurring column titled "Comparaciones bíblicas," a recurring feature most likely created as a response to a rival newspaper's use of scripture to defend their position on canon law. The column critiqued strict adherence to scripture by listing instances where the Bible contradicted itself. On April 9, 1910, the following list of biblical contradictions appeared in the paper without a byline:

God gets tired and rests, Exo. XXX, 17; Jer. XV, 6; Iss. XLIII 2

God doesn't get tired and never rests Isais. XL, 28

God is omnipotent, he sees and hears all Prov. XV, 3; Salmos, CXXXXIX, 7-10; Job. XIV 21-211

God is not omnipotent and does not see all. Gén. XI, 5; Gén. XVIII, 20-2; Gén. III, 8.<sup>87</sup>

The author said these contradictions were compiled for the benefit of those who "read this book which serves as the basis of the Roman Catholic religion." The author also said these quotes were

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<sup>86</sup> Nicasio Idar, "El primer año de vida."

<sup>87</sup> "Comparaciones bíblicas," *La Crónica*, April 9, 1910, 2.

for “intelligent people to examine in order to see if contradictions exist” and concluded by saying that priests do not want people to read these scriptures.<sup>88</sup> We see here that the Idars were not opponents of the Bible, but rather of priests who believed that the holy book needed intermediaries. The Idars believed that everyone should have the freedom to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. In fact, when Nicasio’s youngest son, Aquilino (born June 1904) was asked about his father’s religion, he responded:

My father was a Mason, and, you know, a Mason is a free thinker... [he told us] Don’t let anybody tell you how to think, because you are a free thinker. You are standing on the face of the earth on your own two feet. So you use your own brain to work your way up of any situation. You don’t depend on anybody to tell you that you’re going to Heaven, to paradise, or this and that.<sup>89</sup>

Nicasio wanted both his children and the larger Texas-Mexican community to be free to think and make their own decisions about faith.

The family’s critique of rigid Catholicism was also evident in the family’s view of the relationship between women and the Roman Catholic church. They frequently published articles claiming that Roman Catholicism stifled the progress of women. Nicasio took issue with the manner in which the Roman Catholic church excluded women from church hierarchy. He claimed that the only requirement for a man to be a priest was “ignorance,” while a woman was not even allowed to place one foot “within the saintly sanctuary.”<sup>90</sup> Nicasio continued this critique by claiming that Catholic “paganism made the woman a slave and a toy of men.”<sup>91</sup> Nicasio, echoing his father-in-law’s style of blending history, reform, and religion, offered his own interpretation of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Aquilino Idar Interview.

<sup>90</sup> Nicasio Idar, “Contestación a ‘La Revista Católica’ de N. México,” *La Crónica*, January 1, 1910, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

slavery in different religions and explained how, “Phoenicians, Persians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Macedonians, Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans had all attempted reform.” Yet none, according to Nicasio, “had equal[ed] in cruelty and tyranny towards the women...[nor] enslaved her to help them enrich themselves; none [had] stunted women’s thinking, stopping human progress like Catholicism.”<sup>92</sup> Nicasio’s critiques against dogmatic Catholicism were reminiscent of the manner in which Clemente Vivero implored his audience in Matamoros to abandon Catholicism and adopt the Protestant faith, which was in “perfect harmony with the existing laws of the country, and in the best interest of the people.”<sup>93</sup> Both men were convinced that rigid Catholic dogma curtailed freedom of thought.

The Idar family also provided a platform for authors who held similar views. For example, Dr. Rafael L. Molina, in his article on January 8, 1910, “La Iglesia Católica y la mujer,” explained that if one took the Bible literally, women were supposed to be the “incarnation of evil.”<sup>94</sup> He wrote that there were “thousands” of instances where “Catholic commentators...espoused their opinions against the better half of the human race.”<sup>95</sup> He used an example from Leviticus, chapter 15 to make his point. Molina said Moses condemned men who came into contact with women while they were in a state of impurity (during menstruation). Combining *La Crónica’s* signature mix of disdain and liberal reasoning, Molina explained that such a belief could only come from the “ignorant brain of a primitive man” and that this belief was a “blasphemy against physiology.” Molina reasoned that taking the Bible literally made a “condition of good health in the life of a

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Samuel Alexander Purdie, *Memories of Angela Aguilar de Mascorro, and Sketches of the Friends’ Mexican Mission*, 47–48.

<sup>94</sup> Dr. Rafael L. Molina, “La Iglesia Católica y la mujer: artículo escrito expresamente para La Crónica,” *La Crónica*, January 8, 1910, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

woman” an “impurity” and that if God gave women the privilege of reproduction, any condemnation of that privilege was a condemnation of the divine plan of God.<sup>96</sup> He proceeded to explain that, “those who deceive [women] miserably with superstitions that enslave them morally and intellectually” were bound to be stunted by “the ignominious yoke of ignorance.”<sup>97</sup> Recalling the lessons of late nineteenth-century Darwinian, Herbert Spencer, he ended by asking, “what will happen to Catholicism the day the Spencerian lights illuminate the brains of the extra ribs?” Women, he believed, would abandon Catholicism with the right education and by publishing these types of articles, the editors of *La Crónica* saw rigid Catholic doctrine as out of place with what they believed were modern, liberal, views towards women.

It is important to note that the preceding text presents the Idar family as possessing a harsh view of Catholicism. Given Clemente Vivero’s experience, the family may have held some animosity towards aspects of the Catholic faith. However, their oldest son was Catholic and the family lived in an overwhelmingly Catholic region. Thus, their views of Catholicism must be seen through a different prism. Free-thinking ideology helps square their criticism of Catholicism with their acceptance of it within the family and community. It also helps explain their shift in focus at the end of 1910. Beginning in December of that year, Clemente Idar, Nicasio’s son, began writing a series of articles detailing the manner in which Mexican American children were being segregated in Texas schools. By 1911, the family was filling the pages of *La Crónica* with articles calling attention to the unfair, violent, and degrading treatment of *Tejanos*. Their activism eventually led to the famed “Primer Congreso de 1911” in Laredo, Texas. For Clemente Vivero’s grandchildren, it was the prejudicial treatment of México-Tejanos, not reform of the Catholic

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

church, that demanded their attention.

### *Conclusion*

An examination of Clemente Vivero's life reveals the manner in which three main forces were at work in the formation of his ideology. First, Mexican liberalism provided him an ideology with which to begin questioning his own Catholicism and the supremacy of the church; second, the influence of the reformed Catholic church in his life provided an alternative to the Roman Catholic church; and finally, the Protestant missionary movement provided him with the opportunities and the language to channel his beliefs through a new faith. Vivero never passed from one category to the next in an orderly and logical manner. His path was always a struggle, but his resolve was solid. He spent his life crafting an ideology that allowed him to find some manner of success within the communities he inhabited, even when it drove him into conflict with established hierarchies within those same communities. Vivero never gained an official position as a minister in the Methodist church and thereby, the prominence he probably desired. But his grandchildren eventually held important positions within South Texan and northern Mexican social and political organizations. Moreover, Vivero's influence was alive and well after his death in the pages of the Idar family's newspaper, *La Crónica*. This influence was to be found not only in anti-clerical articles, but also in the family's firm commitment to freethought. Vivero's grandchildren carried with them the legacy of their grandfather, using the same type of rhetoric and courage that Vivero used to fight the injustice he had perceived in Catholicism against a new and different form of injustice—prejudice against Texas-Mexicans. As the remainder of this dissertation will demonstrate, their participation in this battle was an integral component to the formation of a Tejano community in south Texas.

## Chapter 2: The Knights of Progress: Mexican Liberalism, Freemasonry, and La Orden de Caballeros de Honor, 1900-1915

### *Introduction*

On Sunday September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1910, hundreds of Texas border residents congregated in downtown Laredo to watch the Mexican Independence Day parade—the culmination of a four-day celebration. The rain poured throughout the week, but according to *La Crónica* and the *Laredo Daily Times* (the city's English language newspaper), the festival was a triumph due in large part to the free entertainment that included “musical performances...dances, movie showings, athletic and pugilistic games...car races, and an infinity of amusements.”<sup>1</sup> Nicasio Idar, son-in-law to Clemente Vivero, and owner of *La Crónica*, helped organize the city's ethnic Mexican volunteer and civic associations in preparation for the event.<sup>2</sup> For Idar, the event provided a stage for Laredo's most popular organizations to express their patriotism. The *Señoritas* Margarita de la Garza, Constanca Valdez, Margarita Vidaurri, and Jo Moser decorated their float green, red, white, blue, and yellow to represent the colors of Spain, Mexico, and the United States. *Señorita Profesora* Berta Cantú, a local teacher, dressed her kindergarten class in military costumes and had them play revolutionaries yelling out, “*Viva la Independencia, Viva nuestra Señora Guadalupe, and abajo los gachupines*” [Long live Independence, Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe, Down with the Spaniards]. The float given the most newspaper coverage in *La Crónica* was lodge number fourteen of the Order of the Knights of Honor, to which Idar belonged.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All details from the parade come from, “Ligera reseña de la espléndida celebración del Primer Centenario de la Independencia Mexicana en Laredo, Texas,” *La Crónica*, September 24, 1910, 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Celebremos el centenario de la proclamación de la independencia mexicana,” *La Crónica*, March 5, 1910, 1.

<sup>3</sup> The official name of this order was *La Orden de Caballeros de Honor*, however I will use the English translation, Knights of Honor, throughout the chapter.

The Order of the Knights of Honor (KOH) used the parade to display the organization's values and in particular what it could offer the working-class community of Laredo. Members rode atop a float pulled by four horses and adorned with three flags: the United States flag, Mexico's flag, and the lodge's banner. Alongside the float, marched twelve members dressed in black suits, white gloves, and the KOH's insignia. At the float's center was a rendering, most likely made of plaster or *papier mâché*, depicting a widowed mother dressed in mourning attire with her orphaned children by her sides. Next to the fatherless family was a figure, dressed as a knight from the Middle-Ages, carrying a sword and shield, the latter inscribed with a message, "ONE THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED FIFTY PESO POLICY."<sup>4</sup> The marching lodge members, clad in black suits, signaled middle-class values, the two national flags showcased the lodge's patriotism, equally exhibited to both their nation of residence and to their *patria chica*, Mexico; the paper mâché knight-in-shining-armor, plus the insignia on the shield, signaled the tradition of mutualism, fraternity, and equality. Lastly, the shield's message advertised the life insurance policy each member of the order was eligible to receive. The advertisement was not subtle. The message targeted the working-class families in the crowd, many with family members who worked dangerous, backbreaking jobs on railroads, in mines, and bent over fields in the border region. What would happen to the family if the breadwinner suddenly died? The KOH offered a life insurance policy and an egalitarian space to exercise mutualism, patriotism, and fraternity—a space distinct from the Roman Catholic church.

The previous chapter explained how Nicasio Idar and his children inherited their anti-clericalism from Clemente Vivero which they continued to articulate in the family newspaper, *La*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Crónica*. They waged an editorial war against Catholic teachings, which they believed enslaved the minds of the Mexican masses on both sides of the border and stunted Mexican development. But their activism was not solely rooted in castigations of the church. They participated in, and supported, organizations focused on uplifting the minds, spirits, and wages of the border Mexican community. The KOH was one such uplifting organization. It was part of a larger, secular, organizational world, rooted in Mexican traditions, but with an eye towards modernity. The centennial was an example of this framework. Idar envisioned the event as:

a feature of culture and progress on the part of our brothers of Mexican origin in Texas, giving unquestionable evidence of our solidarity in this moment where all our hearts beat full of jubilee and holy patriotism in memory of the Revolutionaries, who for the love of the sublime principle of liberty, made the beautiful and glorious fatherland of our parents, a free, sovereign, and independent country.<sup>5</sup>

Idar described his “brothers of Mexican origin in Texas” as descendants of the revolutionaries who had fought for Mexico’s independence from Catholic Spain. The celebration was “a feature of culture and progress” and “solidarity;” but it also carried economic and cultural cache. Idar noted the positive manner in which Mexican residents of San Antonio had leveraged similar community events,

[San Antonio] owes all of its progress and development, to the well-known activity of its citizens, who through Conventions, International Expositions, carnivals, floral games and other attractions, have garnered the attention of all the southern states, and a few of the northern ones, establishing a prodigious flow of immigration which has enlarged the city.<sup>6</sup>

Mexican residents of San Antonio attracted immigrants and dollars by participating in modern events like conventions and expositions. Idar wanted the Mexicans of Laredo to leverage their

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. “Celebremos el centenario de la proclamación de la independencia mexicana,” *La Crónica*, March 5, 1910, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

collective power to uplift their community economically, socially, and politically. He envisioned the basic building block of such a community as the local lodge.

Underlying this message was Laredo's racial segregation. Participating in Anglo-American organizations was not a viable option for Mexicans in Laredo. One observes this segregation in the "Society" page of the *Laredo Weekly Times*, where next to the names of certain clubs was a parenthetical description "Works in Spanish Language" indicating that this particular lodge catered to Laredo's Spanish-speaking population, almost entirely ethnic Mexican.<sup>7</sup> However, this ethnoracial divide created a unique aspect of Mexican lodges, observed in the KOH's targeted audience: ethnic Mexican lodges along the border were cross-class in nature. The Spanish-speaking people in Laredo included a small group of entrepreneurs, land-owners, and politicians, but not enough to sustain a robust network of Spanish-speaking lodges. Therefore, lodges like the KOH relied on workers to fill their membership rolls. Not only did workers have a future place in this version of ethnic Mexican modernity, but, due to demographics, they were central to the vision.

This chapter introduces associational life in south Texas before zooming in on one organization, the Knights of Honor. The KOH was rooted in Mexican Freemasonry, which found its way to the border region in the late nineteenth century. Mexican Freemasonry promoted values of fraternity, individual perfection, mutualism and rationality amongst the upwardly mobile, educated, financially secure citizenry in Mexico. I argue that Freemasonry was transformed in the border region because lodges operated amongst a narrower Spanish-speaking populace and became dependent on recruiting working-class members. This dependence manifested in the

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<sup>7</sup> "Societies," *Laredo Weekly Times*, January 8, 1911, 9.

inclusion of life-insurance benefits in border lodges that targeted working-class men of good standing in their communities. The KOH recruited working-class members with life-insurance and then instructed them in the ideals of lodge life, in essence, teaching them how to exercise their citizenship in a modern world. The chapter also demonstrates how these lodges clashed with the norms of Mexican Freemasonry, a conflict articulated in masonic periodicals. The chapter concludes by explaining how border residents adopted Freemasonry to address the problems facing Mexicans in Texas during the first decade of the twentieth century. Taken together, the chapter reveals how freemason values from Mexico were adapted to a working-class border community and revealed a vision of modernity that focused on Mexican workers.

#### *Turn-of-the Century Associational Life in South Texas*

The KOH emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1901, but was rooted in older forms of religious associations.<sup>8</sup> They shared attributes of the *cofradías* of colonial New Spain, which organized festivities for the celebration of their patron saints and various devotions to Mary and Christ. Among other duties, *cofradías* attended to the everyday needs of the church including performing “custodial duties at their assigned parishes, conduct[ing] services in the absence of padres, and pool[ing] their resources for charitable works.”<sup>9</sup> This was not unlike the work of nineteenth-century religious brotherhoods such as the *Penitentes* of northern New Mexico, which combined European and Mesoamerican ritual enactments of Christ’s passion, crucifixion and

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<sup>8</sup> On the founding date of the KOH see, Caballeros de Honor, *Estatutos generales de la orden Caballeros de Honor de Brownsville, condado de Cameron, Texas, E.U. de A* (Brownsville, Texas: “El Liberal” Tipografía, 1906).

<sup>9</sup> Anselmo F. Arellano and Luis Ramón Burrola, “Mutualistas: Precursors to Hispanic Labor Organizations in New Mexico, 11 Unpublished manuscript, n.d., p.s. As quoted in, José A. Rivera, “Mutual Aid Societies in the Hispanic Southwest: Alternative Sources of Community Empowerment,” *Southwest Hispanic Research Institute*, September 1, 1984, 26-28.

death.<sup>10</sup> They also cared for the sick, buried the dead, served as a community bank, and organized cooperative farming.<sup>11</sup> Such collective action in the Southwest was not solely limited to life-or-death situations. In some cases, communities simply banded together on practical matters, such as New Mexico's "acequia mutualistas" (ditch associations) that kept ditch irrigation functioning for everyone. Members paid their annual dues in labor or cash.<sup>12</sup> Another one of the more famous forefathers to the KOH was the *Alianza Hispano-Americana*. The *Alianza* was a *mutualista* (mutual-aid organization) founded in Tucson in 1894 during a period of steep economic and social decline for Mexican and Mexican American families in Arizona.<sup>13</sup> Historian José Amaro Hernández attributed the ethnic Mexican community's decline to the rise of new economic systems in Arizona, spurred by the introduction of railroads and associated with the influx of capital brought to the region by Anglo-Americans from the East. The socioeconomic changes combined to crowd out ethnic Mexican businesses in the Southwest.<sup>14</sup> While elite Mexican business people and landowners spearheaded the creation of the *Alianza*, Hernández noted that "the majority of its members were of humble origin, belonging to the Mexican American laboring class."<sup>15</sup> The organization acted as a worker association (not quite yet a labor union); it organized and participated in strikes; provided members financial assistance; and it acted as a social club for its

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<sup>10</sup> José Amaro Hernández, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, Fla: Krieger, 1983), 15. J Espinosa Manuel, "The Origin of the Penitentes of New Mexico: Separating Fact from Fiction," *The Catholic Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (1993): 454-477.

<sup>11</sup> Rivera, "Mutual Aid Societies," 25-26; Hernández, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, Fla: Krieger, 1983), 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

cross-class membership. The *Alianza*, along with other older religious and civic associations were precursors of the KOH.

The KOH was a mutual aid society that provided practical services for its members who fell ill or died. It had elements of *cofradías*, organizing celebrations honoring important historic figures. Instead of celebrating religious feasts as the *cofradías*, KOH lodges celebrated their “secular” heroes such as Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the rebellious priest of Mexican Independence, General Ignacio Zaragoza Seguín, military hero of the Mexican war against France, and President Benito Pablo Juárez García, leader of the mid-century Mexican reform movement, known as the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico (and a prominent Mason). Members of the KOH understood these patriots, liberals, and republicans, as their secular forefathers.<sup>16</sup> All three heroes were also tied together by one last form of association that influenced the formation of the KOH: Freemasonry.

Freemason lodges began to appear in Mexico after Mexican Independence in 1821. Leading up to independence, criollo statesmen from Mexico traveled to Spain as deputies to the *Cortes de Cádiz* where they encountered European lodge-life. The Mexican deputies returned eager to establish lodges in Mexico based on orders in Europe.<sup>17</sup> During the first half of the nineteenth century, Freemasonry in Mexico flourished and was dominated by the Scottish

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<sup>16</sup> Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo interprets the celebration of Cinco de Mayo in the U.S. as part of a larger North American liberal, republican tradition, not just an expression of pure “Mexican nationalism.” For the Mexicans of New Mexico or California, they were celebrating Benito Juárez, Ignacio Zaragoza, the soldiers of Puebla, but just as importantly Abraham Lincoln, who Tenorio calls, Juárez’ ally in the battle against French attempts at building a *l’Amérique latine*. See, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea*, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 96-98; Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, “Los 5 de Mayo,” *Nexos*, May 1, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

(escocés) and York (yorkino) Rites both of which housed Mexico's most important thinkers, powerholders, and statesmen. Historian Andrés Reséndez explained why Freemasonry held such appeal: "Masons (invariably men, as no women were allowed) [gathered] to discuss politics, to exchange information, and—as their political and economic influence increased—to jockey for positions in government and curry economic favors."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the secure lodge created a social environment which allowed members to safely challenge the dominance of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>19</sup> These freemasons were part of a generation of leaders who adhered to a set of liberal values that, as historian Fernando Escalante noted, were constrained by "local powers, political intermediaries, and corporations (particularly the Catholic church)." Escalante argues that the reformers within the Mexican state responded to these constraints by becoming "revolutionary: statist, republican, nationalist, and anticlerical."<sup>20</sup> Freemasonry also took hold in Mexican Texas.<sup>21</sup> In the far reaches of *Coahuila y Texas*, Anglo American *empresarios* used masonic connections to access vacant lands. These organizations were concentrated above the Nueces River, far north of Laredo, in the fertile regions of Central and Eastern Texas in cities like San Antonio, Austin, and Nacogdoches. After 1821, Anglo-American immigrants who entered Mexican-Texas brought with them a tradition of Freemasonry. Alex de Tocqueville noted the enthusiasm of Americans for

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hale said that Mexico looked to U.S. as a "model of goals but not methods." On the relationship between U.S. Liberalism and Mexican Liberalism, Chapter 6 of, Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853* (Yale University Press, 1968), 188–214.

<sup>20</sup> Fernando Escalante, "La dificultad del liberalismo mexicano," *RIFP*, 19, 2001, 84.

<sup>21</sup> On the Protestant movement in northern Mexico, see Chapter 2 and Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes: sociedades protestantes y la Revolución En México, 1872-1911* (México, D.F: Fondo de Cultura Económica El Colegio de México, 1989); Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

associational life and observed that Americans had “perfected the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires.”<sup>22</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, Mexicans and Anglo-Americans were spreading the freemason movement on both sides of the Rio Grande in Texas.

The associational life of Spanish-speakers in south Texas, of which the KOH was a part of, was not the product of imperialistic Americans, nor was it simply an off-shoot of power-wielding Mexican lodges. South Texas freemasons were distinct because they arose in connection to the influx of Mexican immigrant workers in the early twentieth century. These immigrants arrived with a sense of patriotism and openness towards mutual-aid organizations. Historian Roberto Calderón explains that:

[i]ndeed the initial period of organizational growth for the mutual aid society movement in Mexico coincided with the ultimate victory against the French and their conservative native allies. The ethos of republican civic virtues, the ideal and promotion of small-scale production, the assertion of democratic rights, and the nationalistic principles of sovereignty and cooperative defense of, and support for, the social and political rights of all Mexicans constituted integral historic premises underlying the *mutualista* movement as it came to be expressed in Texas.<sup>23</sup>

Twentieth-century anthropologist Manuel Gamio went further: “The Mexican in his own country [rarely] forms co-operative organizations with his fellows for their mutual benefit. In this respect the immigrant in the United States changes radically. His social interests are aroused and develop markedly; the great number of Mexican societies in the United States are a witness to this.”<sup>24</sup> Mexicans migrating to the United States were searching for outlets to express a new version of Mexican patriotism and found it in border lodges.

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<sup>22</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, ed. and trans., Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 489-492.

<sup>23</sup> Roberto Ramón Calderón, “Mexican Politics in the American Era, 1846-1900: Laredo, Texas” (PhD, University of California Los Angeles, 1993), 827.

<sup>24</sup> Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1930), 132.

The political economy of south Texas also shifted in a manner that created the need for new forms of organization in the ethnic Mexican community. Traditionally freemason and mutual-aid associations depended on the middling and upper sectors of society who could afford to pay dues, had free time to meet and practice their rituals, and had some form of education, either formal or informal. These characteristics amongst *rancheros*, *vaqueros*, and *obreros* in south Texas prior to the 1850s were hard to come by, and when they did exist they were not in high enough numbers to create large robust organizations, other than around local temples.

For the entire Mexican period (1821-1848) and the beginning of the U.S. period, south Texas was largely a rural ranching economy, but changed rapidly after the Apaches and Comanches were brutally “pacified,” circa 1878,<sup>25</sup> making way for U.S. public and private infrastructural investments in railroads and irrigation canals.<sup>26</sup> To make farming viable, infrastructure was improved—roads, bridges, municipal works programs were initiated—sewage lines, water works, telegraph lines, electric stations were built, all of which required workers. Out of these changes came a host of new jobs augmenting the professional working-class, populated by postal workers, clerical employees, teachers, and thousands of skilled and unskilled laborers. There was also an increase in the number of service and entertainment industries. Large and

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<sup>25</sup> In 1878, Geronimo Treviño, the regional caudillo of northern Mexico, and General Edward O.C. Ord, commander of the U.S. Army force in south Texas, negotiated an agreement to allow their respective armies to chase raiding bands across the international border. This agreement, along with economic and environmental changes to indigenous society greatly curtailed large scale Indian raiding in the area. See, Evan Anders, *Boss Rule in South Texas: The Progressive Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> See, David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848-1910* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

medium sized city dwellers soon saw more barbershops, restaurants, clothing stores, furniture stores, and movie theatres open up in their downtowns, all eager to service a slow but steadily increasing consumer base. These changes to the demographic and economic landscape of south Texas produced a cross-class *Tejano* community numerically augmented by an ever-growing stream of Mexican laborers crossing the border in hopes of social mobility.<sup>27</sup>

Yet economic and infrastructural improvement did not mitigate the risks present in south Texas—work injury, diseases, and sudden death. South Texans’ livelihood became ever more reliant on increasing chains of interdependence.<sup>28</sup> Commercial life insurance companies were not always eager to provide policies for cash poor Mexican Americans because they wanted higher profits or because of the institutional racism.<sup>29</sup> As anthropologist José Rivera observed, during the nineteenth century, “conditions were ripe for the flourishing of more participatory structures which would offer low-cost insurance at a scale that wage earners, newer immigrants (from Mexico), and small family farmers could afford.”<sup>30</sup> It was in this context that the Knights of Honor emerged.

### *The Knights of Honor*

The Knight of Honor (KOH) was organized in Brownsville, Texas in 1901. Its founders were probably middle-class professionals.<sup>31</sup> By 1910 it had grown to 24 lodges in Texas and 4 in

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<sup>27</sup> Between 1910 and 1920, the Mexican born population in the United States grew from 103,393 to 486, 418. See Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 269

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> See, Kaye Lynn Briegel, “Alianza Hispano-Americana, 1894- 1965: A Mexican American Fraternal Insurance Society” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 1974), 25.

<sup>30</sup> Rivera, “Mutual Aid Societies,” 29.

<sup>31</sup> See, “The Vindication of Caballeros de Honor,” *Brownsville Herald*, June 05, 1912, 1.

Mexico, with membership in each lodge ranging from 90-250.<sup>32</sup> At its peak, the number of lodges most likely reached into the 50s.<sup>33</sup> It had lodges in all the major cities of this region—Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Laredo, and Brownsville—and in many medium small Texas towns. It had many of the qualities of a freemason organization.<sup>34</sup> Like freemason lodges, it regulated membership, held its meeting in secret, and shared many rituals and symbols. In 1911, Laredo’s Lodge No. 14 met every Thursday night in a building named after the much-celebrated Mexican President Benito Juárez.<sup>35</sup> Nicasio Idar was chancellor of the lodge and A.A. Perales was the secretary.<sup>36</sup> There were other offices based on the masonic structure: master of ceremonies, treasurer, first guard, second guard, etc. The KOH also shared Freemason symbols but with a subtle twist. The most common Freemason symbol is the “G” (for Geometry, associated with math and architecture of old construction workers) surrounded by the shape of a triangle formed by a compass and square—the stone mason’s tools. The KOH kept the same triangular shape and used the square, but in lieu of a compass they used two swords to surround an eye (instead of a G). The

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<sup>32</sup> José Amaro Hernández, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, Fla: Krieger, 1983), 65.

<sup>33</sup> *La Prensa* reported on the second-year anniversary of the San Marcos Lodge no. 45 and also mentions the New Braunfels Lodge no. 57. While these numbers don’t consider the possibility of certain lodges closing, or skipping numbers, it is quite possible that the lodges numbered into the 50s. See, “La Logia Caballeros de Honor celebró su segunda aniversario” *La Prensa*, July 01, 1915, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Freemasonry was based on the medieval brick laying craft made up of the skilled “free stone masons.” Modern Freemasonry was standardized with Grand Lodges, established rules, and chartered constitutions. Freemasons adhere to the Blue Lodge system of degrees: apprentice, journeyman, and master mason. After these initial three degrees, lodges differed based on the Rite they practiced. The Rite is the organization’s system of progressive degrees. Rites like the York Rite, represented heavily in Britain and the United States, only have the first three Blue Lodge degrees. See, Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 44.

<sup>35</sup> The hall was named *Sociedad Hijos de Juárez Hall*.

<sup>36</sup> “Societies,” *Laredo Weekly Times*, January 8, 1911, 9.

swords, like the KOH's parade float, symbolized knighthood and pointed to the protective aspect of the organization's offerings.



Figure 2.1 Square and Compass<sup>37</sup>



Figure 2.2 Above is the iconography used by the Knights of Honor (Caballeros de Honor)<sup>38</sup>

Isidoro C. Garza, Grand Chancellor of the organization, assured the public in 1910:

Our secret works are regulated and standardized by Constitutions, Regulations and Liturgies and all based on Freemasonry and are identical to those of this Institution, to such a degree that there has been fraternal recognition and establishment of official relations with a Grand Masonic Lodge in Mexico. As for our philosophical and moral doctrines, they are also the same as those practiced in Freemasonry. A Mason can work in a Knights of Honor lodge with as much strictness as a full member.<sup>39</sup>

However, one important distinction separated Mexican Freemasonry from that of the KOH: membership included a life insurance policy. Each member had a \$1,000-peso life insurance policy (or its equivalent in gold). Upon death, \$50.00 pesos would be used for funeral expenses, \$100.00

<sup>37</sup> Messer Woland, *Square and Compass*, image, July 25, 2006, accessed July 21, 2021, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Square\\_compasses.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Square_compasses.svg).

<sup>38</sup> Isidoro G. Garza, "Excitativa del Gran Concilio de la Orden Caballeros de Honor" *La Crónica*, December 17, 1910, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

pesos for the headstone, with the rest going to his family. The policy also provided for a retirement benefit for the brother “who after three years of being a member becomes incapacitated [or incapable] of making a living.”<sup>40</sup> For membership one had to be between 21 and 55 years of age and undergo a physical examination by a physician reporting a clean bill of health. Once approved, those between ages 21 and 46 paid an initiation fee of \$5.00 worth in gold, those between 47 and 55, \$6.00. After age 55, members only had to pay \$.65 monthly.<sup>41</sup> The funds and policies were held at the Grand Lodge, headquarters in Brownsville, which guaranteed that all local chapter regulations and constitutions were uniform. If a person was selected for membership, and maintained good standing, they gained access to all the KOH’s ritual socials and a life insurance policy. The life insurance policy may seem like a minor benefit of membership, yet it was central to the KOH’s offerings (recall the way the policy was advertised during the parade).

This important KOH benefit drew the ire of one of the most important freemasons working along the border, Ignacio A. de la Peña, Gran Chancellor of the United Mexican Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons. He encouraged lodges to “exercise charity” but warned that they should resist becoming “temples of asylum” or “savings banks.”<sup>42</sup> He feared inserting money into lodge life would create internal disputes and distract from the mental and spiritual pursuits aimed at individual and group betterment. De la Peña wanted to keep the work of mutual-aid separate from the heady pursuits of freemasons.

Many members of the KOH differed. They did not see the need for such a sharp divide between the work mutual-aid societies and freemasons. They thought helping members with

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ignacio de la Peña, “Circular” *La Revista Masónica*, October & November, 5-7. Laredo Public Library, microfilm locus 60 (1201-1203).

economic needs complemented the spiritual succor they offered their members. In October 1911, Sixto Giro González, wrote to *La Revista*, Nicasio Idar's second newspaper, arguing why the KOH should be "regularized"—that is accepted by one of the leading Mexican freemason Grand lodges, also addressing "life insurance" issue. He noted that the principles of Freemasonry were broad enough to encompass differing philosophies so long as each organization remained committed to the core principles of freemason life: "Truth, Virtue, and Science."<sup>43</sup> González argued that a lodge with a life-insurance policy offering did not interfere with these core commitments.

In Britain and Monterrey, Mexico, freemason lodges also offered members life insurance benefits. González went on to note the manner in which Freemasonry sought "individual perfection... fraternity and personal protection." He challenged the belief that insurance was antithetical to freemason values by asking what was wrong with seeking "altruistic respectability for the family during life, and bequeathing an inheritance [to that family] at the time of death. Is this the reason the Knights of Honor are condemned?" he asked, "because it is believed to be anti-Freemason to love the family enough to leave them an inheritance that comes with life insurance?"<sup>44</sup>

Isidoro G. Garza, the 1910 Grand Chancellor of KOH, also touted the benefits of combining the offerings of freemason societies and mutual-aid organizations, but for slightly different reasons. For him, mutual aid societies were too limited. Garza noticed the proliferation of mutual-aid societies in Texas, but argued that not enough of them helped uplift the individual. Writing in *La Crónica*, he reminded readers:

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<sup>43</sup> Sixto Giro González, "La masonería y los Caballeros de Honor, *La Revista Masónica*," Oct-Nov 1911, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

With true sadness we have observed the indolence of the Mexican in Texas, in what is referred to as sociability. By now, their aspirations should be much higher and should not concentrate solely on forming mutual-aid societies, which more than anything, develop mendacity and awaken hatreds and ambitions.<sup>45</sup>

Garza had tired of organizations that merely provided monetary security and offered no personal uplift. He wanted more organizations that undertook both.

### *Mexican Freemasons and the KOH*

Two related issues loomed large in the minds of KOH leaders: 1) What would be the role of religion in the KOH? and 2) What place would American institutions play in an organization made up of Mexicans but located in the United States? These two questions were debated in masonic periodicals and reveal a nationalistic ethos developed for border Mexicans. Leaders envisioned the KOH as an institution which would transplant the best of Mexico's liberal values to the border region and instill them amongst the Mexican migrants. A close look at two issues—foreign influence and church power—offer a window into this vision of a border inflected Freemasonry.

On May 14, 1909, Ignacio de la Peña's penned an article for Idar's masonic periodical, *La Revista*, which offered a fascinating glimpse into the Mexican freemason ideals. De la Peña argued:

all the Freemasonry that, using the well-known cloak of universalism, actively works against natural law, against reason and against science: consistent with this principle, we consider bad Freemasonry that is mystified and mystifying masonry like that which places the Bible on its altars.<sup>46</sup>

He cited as evidence Article 7 of his Grand Lodge's constitution, which obliged each brother to work for "individual perfection" and "human progress, destroying ignorance and combatting vice."

For de la Peña, this was impossible, if the Bible rested on their altars. Masons would be "swearing

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ignacio de la Peña, "Circular" *La Revista Masónica*, October & November, 5-7. Laredo Public Library, microfilm locus 60 (1201-1203).

over it, respecting its mystical laws, that contradict other religious credos, mining the spirit of tolerance of the fraternal institution.” He believed it impossible to improve society if individuals were under “the tutelage of the political and religious dogmas that tend to subjugate the freedom of thought.” There was little question as to where he and his lodge stood on the issue of religion.

De la Peña’s lodge hued closer to the Scottish Rite Mexican Freemasonry of the nineteenth century, which was distinct from its U.S., York Rite counterpart. By the early twentieth century this division between Scottish and York Rites was both religious and national in nature.<sup>47</sup>

After Mexican independence in 1821, political factions found their way into freemason lodges associated with the Scottish and York Rites. Historian Claudio Lomnitz argued that post-independence Freemasonry helped unite “regional elites [and forge] interregional networks that...prefigure[d] the national bureaucracy after independence.”<sup>48</sup> Freemasonry provided a structure that allowed certain interest groups to organize and disseminate their political propaganda in hopes of gaining power.<sup>49</sup> In the 1820s, the Scottish Rite lodges were associated with Spaniards,

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<sup>47</sup> Antonio Flores Zavala points to four general phases of masonic activity in Mexico. The first between 1760-1824, when European Freemasons arrived in New Spain and began initiating Spaniards, later Mexicans, into their lodges. The second phase, from 1825-1860, is the period when masonic activity was “Mexicanized,” that is Mexicans began to initiate and install European rites such as the Scottish and York. In addition, dissatisfied Yorkinos and Escoces branched off and created their own rite, the Mexican National Rite. The third phase, 1860-1900, saw internecine fights, rebellions, and secessions and many attempts at centralization by multiple Grand Lodges in Mexico City. Lodges promoted centralization by attempting to control the ability to create a lodge, and by trying to regulate how one rose through the ranks within an order. The fourth and final phase, 1900-1936, was distinct in the arguments over confederation or centralization and over what stance the associations should take on the Mexican Revolution. See, Marco Antonio Flores Zavala, “La masonería en el centro-norte de México, 1869-1914,” *Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería* 6, no. 1 (December 2014): 109–30.

<sup>48</sup> Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Pierre Bastian, “Una ausencia notoria: la francmasonería en la historiografía mexicanista,” *Historia Mexicana* 44, no. 3 (March 1995): 449.

who sought both to maintain their power in a newly independent Mexico and to advance a Spanish version of rational culture and politics. Conversely, the York Rite, during the 1820s, was associated with the political faction that supported a liberal system of government. In 1825, U.S. ambassador in Mexico, Joel Poinsett, received charters from the Grand Lodge of New York for five new lodges practicing the York Rite.<sup>50</sup> As time passed and Spanish citizens were expelled, Mexicans slowly began to fill the ranks of the Scottish Rite lodges. By the late-nineteenth century, the originally less liberal Scottish Rite lodges that were originally conservative became associated with anti-clericalism, a prominent characteristic of nineteenth-century Mexican liberalism (see chapter 1). Similarly, by this period York Rite lodges started to be associated with a particular form of liberalism associated with Yankee Protestantism. York Rite lodges were increasingly populated by foreigners, many from the United States. Moreover, they began to require that members place the Bible on their lodge altars. American lodge members, many Protestant, had a very different relationship to the church than did Mexican members. Therefore, the “Bible display requirement” became a central issue for Scottish and Mexican National Rites, who believed Freemasonry in Mexico needed to be native and secular. De la Peña fiercely opposed any insertion of religion into lodge life. Nicasio Idar supported de la Peña’s position by reprinting his articles in *La Crónica* and *La Revista*.

Idar opined on the subject in an article titled, “On Latin Masonry,” reprinted in English in the *Universal Free Mason*.<sup>51</sup> Idar argued that having the Bible in the lodge was a form of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Additionally, during this period, in March of 1826, Freemasons dissatisfied with both Rites, seceded and formed the “Mexican National Rite.” The period between the creation of this Rite and 1845 sees Congress prohibit secret societies in 1828, only to see them begin to arise again in the middle of the nineteenth century.

<sup>51</sup> Nicasio Idar, “On Latin Masonry,” *The Universal Free Mason*, Vol. 5, No. 1, July, 1912, 7-8.

“dogmatism” that went against the Latin and Latin American liberal Masonry.<sup>52</sup> Mixing dogmatism with liberal Masonry, was like “mixing oil and water.” The Universal Free Mason was aimed at an English-speaking audience, therefore, that outlined the major difference between North American masonry and Mexican masonry for the non-Mexican audience. North American Freemasonry defined their “dogmatic principles” as: divinity, happiness of a future life, and solidarity based on the Bible. “Not so, the liberal Latin and Latin American Masonry,” Idar wrote. The people in Latin countries lived under the eye of the Roman Catholic church with its “politico-religious organization,” which maintained a “Machiavelli-like” hold on society. Spain, France, Italy, [along with]... all the nations of Latin America felt “the black hand of Romanism inciting brother against brother... [in] fratricidal war.” For this reason, they could not base their Masonry on the same religious principles. Rather their Masonic work was rooted in the trinity of:

Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, from which arise the philanthropic and altruistic principles that we practice...to arrive at the TRUTH by investigation of practical science and virtue.

Idar claimed the York Rite “darkened the holy of holies that in a free man ought to remain forever lighted” because it was allowing religion into the secular associational world. York Rite Masonry was “extend[ing] its claws and show[ing] its feline teeth against liberal Masonry.” He made it clear that he was opposed to all religion in the lodge, not just Catholicism, and warned against a future in which Protestant influence might become as “powerful as was Catholicism in its best days.” Despite practicing in the United States, Idar was unwilling to adopt American forms of Freemasonry. De la Peña echoed the same fears but with more nationalistic fervor. “In our work we are both Mexicans and Freemasons,” who deny membership to anybody who repudiated their

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<sup>52</sup> Liberal Masonry (or Continental/Latin/Adogmatic) is often juxtaposed to Regular Masonry which is both under the Grand Lodge of England and insists on scripture being open in the lodge.

homeland.<sup>53</sup> The “sacred rights of man,” he penned, were perfectly linked to citizenship. De la Peña’s ideal “was to have a Freemasonry that was at its core Mexican, without foreign tutelage, without friendly bonds with bodies who do not share our same aspiration.” He saw United States Freemasonry as dangerous, given the threat of “imperialistic desires.”<sup>54</sup> Both Idar and de la Peña wanted members of their organizations to practice Freemasonry unconstrained by Mexican Catholicism and American Protestantism.

If de la Peña and Idar argued for ideological freedom, the Grand Chancellor of the KOH, Garza, wanted to provide members with a different form of liberation: independence from Anglo-American institutions. Garza noted the way Mexican were often isolated, and left out of Anglo-American associations, which often only accepted the most wealthy and powerful Mexicans into their clubs. He envisioned the KOH as an antidote. He wanted to forge the KOH into a tight-knit group that would promote economic and political solidarity among Mexicans by investing in and supporting enterprises that were, in his words, “*netamente mexicanas*” (truly Mexican).<sup>55</sup> He hoped that such acts would bring respectability, confidence, and protection to Mexican associations and businesses, and by proxy, to local Mexican residents. Like de la Peña, Garza urged his fellow ethnic Mexicans in south Texas not to look towards United States for respectability, trust, and protection. He routinely chastised those Mexicans who persecuted their own people, served as spies and whistleblowers against their own race, and those who chose to slander Mexicans who used their talents and intellect to achieve upward mobility. He asked his readers rhetorically: “If we do not have confidence in the men of our race, how can we expect other races to have it for

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<sup>53</sup> De la Peña, “Circular,” 5-7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Garza, “Excitativa del Gran Concilio,” 3.

us?” Garza believed that the Mexicans in south Texas needed more “cultured associations” which in addition to providing monetary benefits to their members would also contribute, “to the change in ideas, to intellectual progress, to a culture of knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> The KOH fulfilled this need with its “principles of Fraternity, its tendency towards unity amongst Mexicans, its sage moral and intellectual doctrines that have been beneficial in awakening the hearts of Mexicans, [its] grand ideas of exaltation, and above all else, its life insurance policy.”<sup>57</sup>

The KOH became a distinct border institution free of Catholic dogma, opposed to imperial American Protestantism, and open to cooperative Mexican participation. One Texas freemason, writing to *La Crónica* from Monteola, Texas, tied together these three threads perfectly. In a critique, aimed against the Catholic church, Dionosio Rodríguez defended the secular, freemason movement promoted in Idar’s newspaper. Rodríguez denounced strict adherence to Catholic dogma by noting that the Gospels *did not* explicitly condemn a man, “Because he did not fast or tithe. Because he did not pray to idols. Because he did not confess or commune. Because *he was* a Freemason. Because he was a [a member] of the Knights of Honor. Because he read *La Crónica* from Laredo, Texas.”<sup>58</sup> In this quote, Rodríguez captured the close association among *La Crónica*, Freemasonry, the Knights of Honor, and anti-clericalism.

### *Conclusion*

On March 14, 1916, just five days after Pancho Villa’s infamous raid on Columbus, New Mexico, the headquarters of the KOH in Brownsville was destroyed and membership rolls, policy certificates, and meeting minutes disappeared.<sup>59</sup> Many suspected foul play. That is where the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Dionosio Rodríguez, “A Macedonio Discípulo,” *La Crónica*, May, 7, 1910, 2 (emphasis mine).

<sup>59</sup> “El asunto de la Orden de Caballeros de Honor,” *La Prensa*, March, 19, 1916.

historical record ends. Little more is known about the KOH. Twenty-five years later, in 1941, the KOH was mentioned in print when Eduardo Idar, Nicasio Idar's son, wrote an op-ed in *La Prensa* addressed to Alonso S. Perales. Eduardo wrote to Perales about school discrimination in south Texas, explaining that it had long been a concern of the ethnic Mexican community dating back to the first decade of the twentieth century when: "The Knights of Honor became... deeply interested in the case [of discrimination]." He continued, "unfortunately this organization, disappeared for embezzlement of sixty thousand dollars of their resources at its headquarters in Brownsville, Texas."<sup>60</sup> It appears as though the one quality that made the KOH so attractive to the working-class—the life insurance policy—may have also been the cause of its downfall.

The chapter explained how the Idars promoted the KOH and its values via their two newspapers in an effort to unite Mexicans and usher in a new era of Mexican modernity in the border region. Yet the context in which the KOH emerged—nineteenth-century Mexico—was distinct from the world in which the KOH took hold, twentieth-century Texas. In particular, the entrenched power of the Catholic church in Mexico was less pronounced in south Texas. In this new locale, new enemies emerged who were just as threatening to the Idars and the community they represented. Mexicans in Texas faced extralegal violence, segregation, and isolation from Anglo-American institutions. The following chapter will examine how the values of the KOH were applied to new problems facing the border community of south Texas.

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<sup>60</sup> Eduardo Idar, "Las Vejaciones a los Mexicanos en Texas," *La Prensa*, October, 16, 1910, 3. That fact that the association ended for mismanagement of funds harkens back to the warning Ignacio de la Peña gave in his Circular in 1906. The accumulation of funds was dangerous for an organization, he had warned.

### **Chapter 3: Coming to Terms with *Mexicanidad* in South Texas: The Languages of Whiteness, Blood, and Patriotism**

*Do you remember what he often told us, that he never worried about losing money in circumstances where others benefited more than he? Do you remember that he always owned a printing press and sustained it with huge losses, saying that it was the best education he could give us? Do you remember what he always said: 'When I do a good service for another person, I know they will not thank me, but when I die, and [my children] wander the world, there will be no shortage of people who will offer [them] a piece of bread if [they find themselves] in need' ... I heard those hopes confirmed in words like these: 'Your father [Nicasio] published a masonic magazine, right?' I could quote an infant number of phrases ... that come from people who have a fond memory of him.<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Introduction*

On March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1920 Clemente Idar wrote to his younger brother, Federico, thanking him for kind words conveyed in an earlier letter regarding his work on behalf of ethnic Mexican workers in Texas. Clemente reminisced about their father, Nicasio, who had died in 1914, six years prior, in the Idar family home in Laredo, Texas. He recalled their father's commitment to the printing trade, work he believed was "the best education" he could provide his children. Clemente also reminded Federico of Nicasio's commitment to Freemasonry, which ensured that his children would always have a network of allies who served the needs of ethnic Mexicans residing on both sides of the Rio Grande. He shared his belief that their father would have approved of his sons' current occupations, working on behalf of "the race of men from which we descend."<sup>2</sup> At the time, the two brothers lived and worked on opposite sides of the border. Thirty-seven-year-old Clemente was stationed in El Paso, Texas, working as a general organizer for the American Federation of Labor; twenty-seven-year-old Federico resided in Monterrey, Nuevo León, where he served as the General Secretary of the Brotherhood of Conductors, Engineers, Fireman, and Brakemen, a national

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from Clemente N. Idar to Federico Idar, 05 March 1920, Box 1, Folder 16, Clemente N. Idar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin (cited herein as CNIP).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Mexican labor union.<sup>3</sup> Nicasio was convinced that if his children learned the printing trade they would never be too long without work. He believed that there would always be a need for typesetters, journalists, and editors, print workers who as part of a fraternity looked out for one another. Historian Laura Gutierrez-Witt described the network of Spanish-speaking columnists in Texas as a “close-knit network of professional journalists, writers, editors, publishers, and printers” who “published each other’s stories...banded together for mutual benefit...[and] apprenticed at each other’s shops.”<sup>4</sup> This trade association allowed for the Nicasio’s children to call upon their fellow printers for work during hard times. Clemente’s letter to Federico also testifies to the high esteem in which the two brothers held their father and reveals the deep commitment each held to ethnic Mexicans residing in Mexico and the United States. They learned their father’s lessons, at his side, working in the family-run newspaper, *La Crónica*.

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<sup>3</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Mr. W.S. Stone, Box 4 Folder 3, FIP 21 September 1920.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Gutiérrez-Witt, “Cultural Continuity in the Face of Change: Hispanic Printers in Texas,” in *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage. Volume II Volume II*, ed. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Chuck Tatum (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996), 276.

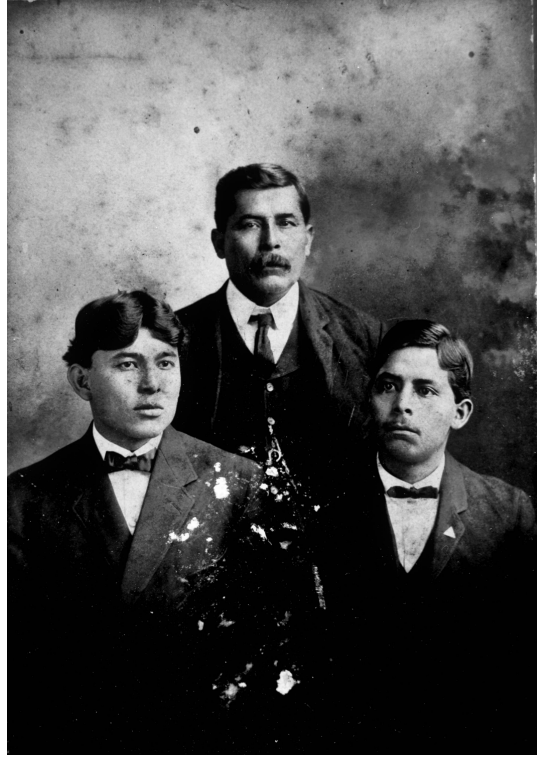


Figure 3.1 Nicasio Idar, 51 years old (upper center) and sons, Clemente (left) and Eduardo (right), 1906<sup>5</sup>

This chapter analyzes stories published in *La Crónica* for 1910 and 1911 (the only years available). I focus on the language Nicasio, the paper's editor and main contributor, used to reinforce the bonds between Mexicans living in Laredo and the surrounding border region. First, the chapter establishes the centrality of the printing trade in the lives of the Idar family. By 1920, both Clemente and Federico were working in the labor movement, but they shared a common background in journalism. The chapter will then analyze how *La Crónica* deployed an ethnoracial understanding about Mexicans, operating across multiple registers in order to craft a message of unity and uplift ethnic amongst diverse ethnic Mexicans. The language the Nicasio, Clemente, and

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<sup>5</sup> Nicasio Idar and Sons, File 084-0589, General Photograph Collection—Institute of Texan Cultures, University of Texas at San Antonio.

sometimes Jovita Idar used was fluid, sometimes contradictory, but was the natural byproduct of their larger mission: to unite a diverse community under one larger pan-ethnic identity. They believed such a united coalition would inspire economic and political loyalty to Mexican leaders. They wanted people of Mexican descent to buy from Mexican retailers and vote for candidates who provided jobs and resources to the Mexican community. They also believed a united Mexican people would be better equipped to combat prejudice in Texas against Mexicans. In the 1910s the ethnic Mexican community in Texas expanded as Mexican migrants fled the violence of the Mexican Revolution and looked for work in Texas' emerging agricultural industry. In response to the extralegal violence, segregation, and worker exploitation encountered by Mexican workers, the Idars and their Freemason and mutual-aid community organized a convention known as *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista* (herein First Mexican Congress) the subject of the third section. The chapter concludes by examining the Idar family's role in both the Mexican Revolution and World War I in order to reveal how their unique border patriotism provided a template for ethnic Mexican loyalty to both the United States and Mexico.

*Printing, the Family Trade, 1880-1910*

Nicasio Idar was born in Port Isabel, Texas in 1855, eventually made his way to Laredo, where he married Jovita Vivero in 1882. Between 1882 and 1904, the couple had thirteen children, three or four who may have died at or near birth. The Idar children grew up in a tempestuous period. Between 1900 and 1930, the population of south Texas quadrupled from 79,934 to 322,845.<sup>6</sup> Midwesterners moved to the region with dollar signs in their eyes, expecting to earn between \$300 and \$500 dollars of profit on each acre of land they purchased—an idea crafted by advertising

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<sup>6</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 109.

agencies from Kansas City and Chicago, hired by south Texas boosters to promote development.<sup>7</sup> These boosters distributed magazines in northern cities highlighting the ease with which a person could transform the region's "shrubland to cropland" along with pictures of ethnic Mexican laborers standing near vehicles ready to work in south Texas' the "Magic Valley."<sup>8</sup> These advertisements followed massive investment in irrigation. Between 1909 and 1919, the amount of irrigated land in the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Webb increased from 54,673 acres to 228,020, a 317% percent increase.<sup>9</sup> Infrastructural improvements and the population increase converted south Texas into one of the nation's most productive farming regions and transformed an old ranching society, where Mexicans still had political and economic power, into a commercial farming society dominated by a newly arrived Anglo community.<sup>10</sup>

Northerners and Midwesterners brought a racialized social order in which ethnic Mexicans, considered a mixed-race people, were relegated to the lowest rungs. In quick succession, Mexicans were dispossessed of their massive landholdings and denied of their equal rights to public space.<sup>11</sup> Their appeals to authorities were ignored, or, in the worst cases, they were subjected to lynch law.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 139; Anders, *Boss Rule in South Texas*, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Brannstrom and Matthew Neuman, "Inventing the 'Magic Valley' of South Texas, 1905-1941," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 2 (2009): 129.

<sup>9</sup> James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>10</sup> By 1924, Hidalgo became the country's highest-producing agricultural county. See, Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 31;

<sup>11</sup> On land dispossession and segregation see Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, Part 1 and Part 3. For a breakdown on the changes to landownership and work patterns see Arnolde De León *The Tejano Community 1836-1900* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1982), 63 (Table 6).

<sup>12</sup> Between 1911 and 1924 William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb found that at least 124 Mexicans were lynched by Anglos in the border region, see William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb "The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848-1928" *Journal of Social History* Vol. 37. No. 2 (Winter, 2003), pg. 423.

The plight and future of ethnic Mexicans in Texas became the central focus of Nicasio Idar's newspaper, *La Crónica*.

The Idar family archive holds no evidence explaining where Nicasio learned the printing trade, nor where and from whom he purchased his first printing press. It is very likely that his father-in-law, Clemente Vivero, introduced him to the trade since Vivero worked as a colporteur in the mid-nineteenth century and published articles and poetry in newspapers in Zacatecas and Tamaulipas.<sup>13</sup> Nicasio, on the other hand, was a mostly self-educated man who did not complete high school. In 1869, at the age of 14, he spent a year working on a cattle-drive from south Texas to Kansas City. After their 1882 marriage, Nicasio and Jovita Vivero lived with Jovita's widowed mother, Nicolasa, who owned a boarding house that rented rooms to railroad workers.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1880s, Nicasio worked for the Mexican National Railway as a messenger on the train line running between Nuevo Laredo and the northern mining city of San Luis Potosí.<sup>15</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican President Porfirio Díaz gave concessions to foreigners to build railroads; the Mexican National Railway was financed by a conglomeration of business interests in the United States headed by William Jackson Palmer. By September 28, 1888, the line was running from Mexico City to Laredo.<sup>16</sup> As an American born ethnic Mexican laborer, Idar gained a unique perspective experiencing discrimination first hand in Mexico. Ethnic Mexicans performed the same work as Anglo-American foreigners, yet were paid less. They

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<sup>13</sup> He wrote for the anti-Catholic, Protestant periodical *La Antorcha Evangélica* headquartered in Villa de Cos, Zacatecas and contributed poems to the Tamaulipas periodical, *La Buena Nueva* of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Vivero was firmly planted in the printed world

<sup>14</sup> Eduardo (Ed) Idar Jr. Interview by Margo Gutiérrez, Miscellaneous Sound Recordings, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>15</sup> Marcelo N. Rodea, *Historia del movimiento obrero ferrocarrilero en México*, 1890-1943, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Fred W. Powell, *The Railroads of Mexico* (Boston, Mass.: The Stratford Co., 1921), 133-134.

received between \$.75 and \$2.00 dollars per day, while their Anglo-American counterparts earned between \$1.25 and \$2.50 per day (plus food) for the same work.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the majority of Mexican workers were excluded from the best positions and kept in low-wage, unskilled railroad work. The unskilled nature of their work also prevented them from joining any of the “Big Four” trade Unions—the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Order of Railway Conductors, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman and Enginemen. The Big Four Unions were ostensibly internationals, yet their membership practices in Mexico, essentially made them Anglo-American only. Ethnic Mexicans were unable to negotiate for better wages, settle grievances, and ensure safety standards.<sup>18</sup>

Nicasio attempted to address the lack of representation for ethnic Mexicans by helping form two unions. In 1887, together with a small group of brakemen, stokers, and telegraphers working in Nuevo Laredo, he organized one of the first unions of workers in Mexico, *La Sociedad del Ferrocarril Mexicano*.<sup>19</sup> The organization folded soon after due to competition with the Knights of Labor.<sup>20</sup> A few years later, in 1890, he attempted to organize another union in Mexico, *La Orden Suprema de Empleados Ferrocarrileros Mexicanos (Orden Suprema)* in San Luis Potosí.<sup>21</sup> This too was short-lived. These unions failed, yet working side-by-side with ethnic

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<sup>17</sup> Lorena M. Parlee, “The Impact of United States Railroad Unions on Organized Labor and Government Policy in Mexico (1880-1911),” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 64, no. 3 (August 1984), 447.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>19</sup> Juan Felipe Leal, *Del mutualismo al sindicalismo en México: 1843-1911* (Juan Pablos editor, S.A. / D.R. Voyeur, 2012), 69; Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>20</sup> John M Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1987), 84; Leal, *Del mutualismo al sindicalismo en México*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Rodea, *Historia del movimiento obrero ferrocarrilero en México*, 82; Parlee, “The Impact of United States Railroad Unions on Organized Labor and Government Policy in Mexico (1880-1911),” 453.

Mexicans facing discrimination on a railway line funded by American capital allowed him to experience how his Mexicanness trumped his American nationality in a transnational border economy. This experience positioned him to speak to a binational community of ethnic Mexican workers about problems that transcended nationality.<sup>22</sup>

Nicasio transitioned from railroad work to journalism around the turn of the century. By 1896, Nicasio had made the printing trade the Idar family business. We know this because in that year the *Galveston Daily News* reported that Clemente, the “14 year old son of Assistant Marshall Idar, was running a Gordon press...[and] had four fingers of his left hand mashed so badly that they had to be amputated to the second joint.”<sup>23</sup> Clemente’s amputated fingers served as a lifetime reminder of his family’s roots in the printing trade.<sup>24</sup> Nicasio and Jovita had fourteen children, although as many as five did not live beyond adolescence.<sup>25</sup> Each of the Idar children was expected to pull their weight in the family business. The oldest, Clemente, Jovita, and Eduardo set type, wrote articles, and edited columns; the middle children Elvira, Federico, and Moises helped with advertisements and clerical duties; and the youngest children, José, Juvencio, and Aquilino delivered papers to subscribers as soon as they were old enough to do so.<sup>26</sup> Nicasio maintained and

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<sup>22</sup> Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*; 61; Leal, *Del mutualismo al sindicalismo en México*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, Sept 03, 1896, pg. 9

<sup>24</sup> Later his amputation disqualified him from the military draft during World War I.

<sup>25</sup> There were at least nine Idar children who lived beyond adolescence: Clemente (1883-1934), Jovita (1885-1947), Eduardo (1887-1947), Elvira (1892-1925), Federico (1893-1938), José (1898-1969), Moises (1902-1953), Juvencio (1903-1947), and Aquilino (1904-1989). As many as five—Clarita, Moises, Enrique, unnamed, Lola—may have died either near birth, or at a young age, although details about these children have been hard to confirm. See, “Family Records,” n.d., Federico Idar and Idar Family Papers Box 4 Folder 18, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Aquilino I. and Guadalupe Idar, 1984, interviewed by Jerry Poyo and Tom Shelton, October, 26, 1984, Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Collection, OHT 331.8 I18, University of Texas at San Antonio.

edited two newspapers, *La Crónica* and *La Revista Masónica*—a Freemason broadside circulating in the United States, Mexico, and purportedly in South America and Europe. The publication focused on religion and Masonic history. *La Crónica*, began circulation circa 1896. The *Brownsville Daily Herald* described it as a, “a new weekly paper published [in Laredo by] ... Senor N. Idar .... It is a neat and interesting paper”<sup>27</sup>

The paper not only served as Nicasio’s trade it also provided a platform with which to unite a border community of ethnic Mexicans, as conveyed on the frontpage:

As our patriotic duty, we have committed ourselves to the task of uplifting the social, political, and commercial spirit of our compatriots in Texas, defending always, unconditionally, their interests [and] serving like an organ of the *elemento mexicano y méxico-texano* in this country.<sup>28</sup>

#### *On the Border of Racial Systems*

Organizing Mexicans—largely seen as mixed-race—in a region structured around a white vs black opposition, and where “whiteness” acquired meaning as a racial marker of dominance, was a challenge. This was because ethnic Mexicans did not consider themselves black, while at the same time, they were aware that Anglo-Americans did not consider Mexicans white. After Reconstruction, American law produced a dichotomous understanding of race. People were

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<https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4/id/1304/> (herein cited Aquilino Idar Interview).

<sup>27</sup> *Brownsville Daily Herald*, May 17, 1898, pg. 3. *La Crónica* was also mentioned in *The Chaparral*: “Mr. N. Idar, Assistant City Marshall and Editor of *La Crónica*, we regret to state has been quite sick the early part of this week.” See, *The Chaparral*, February 18, 1899. Cited in, José E. Limón, “El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Contemporary Chicanismo,” in *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Francisco H. Vázquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 189.

<sup>28</sup> “Progreso de ‘La Crónica,’” *La Crónica*, undated, (circa 1910). All articles in *La Crónica* were printed in Spanish, translations are mine. However, at times I will leave certain phrases in Spanish to emphasize the importance of the phrase in Spanish. For example, México-Texano, which might be translated to Texas-Mexican, will be left in Spanish original; At some point between 1900 and 1909, the paper was placed on hiatus, and did not begin its second run until 1909. The paper continued until Nicasio’s death in 1914.

judged based on their perceived racial distance from blackness or whiteness. For example, in 1924 the state of Virginia's deemed any person black if they contained even 1/16<sup>th</sup> African ancestry (in other states the fraction was as small as 1/64<sup>th</sup>). This "calculation" was known as the "one drop rule" and contrasted sharply with racial understandings in Mexico.<sup>29</sup>

While far from having a completely fluid system of racial classification, the laws and customs in Mexico created a more pliant racial structure, allowing for movements from one racial category to the next over time and over the course of one's life. Scholars often cite the *Régimen de Castas*, a code of racial categories used to classify persons of mixed racial origins hierarchically.<sup>30</sup> During the colonial era, racial categories were official and legal. After independence, race was putatively disavowed, but its use continued, though no longer forming the legal basis for classification. Mexico's system was in many ways an impracticality. A dichotomous racial system was unlikely in Mexico primarily because its indigenous population represented between 38 and 60 percent of the total population in the late nineteenth century and the line between indigenous and mestizo was too porous.<sup>31</sup> Mexico could not demographically afford to create a racial structure that sought to draw a strict line between its races. As historian Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo notes, while debates concerning *mestizaje* occurred during the second half of the

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<sup>29</sup> This was not the first time blood quantum was used for racial designations. For a list of legislation pertaining to blood quantum legislation see, Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011); Daniel J. Sharfstein argues that "the reality of racial migration reveals that the one drop rule did not keep whites racially pure; rather, it enabled them to believe that they were." See, Daniel J. Sharfstein, "Crossing the Color Line: Racial Migration and the One Drop Rule, 1600-1860," *Minnesota Law Review*, 91, (2007), 597.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter 6, María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Charles A. Hale, *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 220.

nineteenth century, “[i]n reality these were not debates about the possibility of mestizaje, a reality no one tried to prevent. It was not even... a debate over whether mestizaje was good or bad, but rather it was a debate over nation, citizenship, and the State given the *inevitability* of mestizaje.”<sup>32</sup>

At the turn of the century, with the U.S. embracing the “One Drop Rule” and Mexico championing *mestizaje*, the racial systems of Mexico and the United States appeared to be worlds apart. In border towns like Laredo, Texas, there was no clear racial ideology in place; rather, race closely correlated with nationality and class, making it situational. At the nexus of two countries, border residents routinely came into contact with people who lived and died under different systems of racial classification.<sup>33</sup> Newcomer Anglo-Americans saw Mexicans at best as a people of mixed race, at worst they referred to them as “mongrels” and “half-breeds.” Within this evolving racial order, Nicasio deployed three discourses on race, operating on different levels: 1) he preached the gospel of “social science,” which spoke of uplifting the Mexican race through educational and cultural improvements; 2) he used legal definitions of whiteness to claim rights, but equally as important, to distance ethnic Mexicans from African-Americans; and 3) he called for unity based on shared “*sangre*” (blood), emphasizing a common history between long-term ethnic Mexican residents of Texas, the recently arrived migrants, and the whole population south of the Rio Grande. These three discourses on race will be examined below.

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<sup>32</sup> Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, “Del mestizaje a un siglo de Andrés Molina Enríquez,” in *En Busca de Molina Enríquez: Cien Años de Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales* (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2009), 41 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> In Chapter 1 of the dissertation I explain how during the late-nineteenth-century south Texas was transformed by the influx of newcomers from Mexico and the U.S. South and Midwest making the border region.

*Coming to Terms With Mexicanidad: The Language of Social Science, Whiteness, and Blood*  
In *La Crónica*, Nicasio did not attack the logic of race. Instead he concentrated on bettering *la raza mexicana* by calling on readers to do everything they could to ensure that all Mexicans were “progressing.” The Idar family lived in a world that was thoroughly structured by the language of race, evolution, and social Darwinism. In Mexico, the work of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, who historian Charles Hale called the “‘twin pillars’ of European positivism,”<sup>34</sup> and the scholarship of Charles Darwin, shaped how Mexican intellectuals understood the relationship between people and society. Adherents of positivism believed communities were part of a larger social organism governed by scientific laws. This meant society could be observed and experimented upon in an effort to improve the social organism. By 1910, Comtean positivism and social Darwinism in Mexico were being challenged by young intellectuals, including José Vasconcelos, Manuel Gamio, Justo Sierra, and Andrés Molina Enríquez. However, Mexican positivists agreed that improvement of the Mexican people was not dependent on biology or mixed-race degeneration, but rather it was tied to education.

In *La Crónica*, Nicasio published translations of works centered on evolution and social Darwinism including St. George Mivart’s “Theory of Evolution,” Alfred Russell Wallace’s “Human Progress: Past and Future,” and Herbert Spencer’s “Veracity.”<sup>35</sup> These writings provided

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<sup>34</sup> Hale, *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico*, 205. On the manner in which Positivism took form in Mexico, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 7.

<sup>35</sup> “El Primer año de vida,” *La Crónica*, 2. The article also mentions “Mind and Body” by W.H. Thompson, yet it is unclear to which article this refers. There’s a book by William Hanna Thomson called, *Brain and Personality: Or, The Physical Relations of the Brain to the Mind* originally published in 1906 which may be the one mentioned. Yet there is also the book *Mind and Body: The Theories of their Relation* by Alexander Bain, originally published in 1873 that might have simply been attributed to the wrong author. Alfred Russell Wallace, “Human Progress: Past and Future,” *The Arena*, No. 26, January, 1892. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics, Introduction* by Tibor R. Machan (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics Press, 1978). Originally published in 1897.

a social scientific explanation for why non-white populations were inferior, but importantly, did not damn them. For example, “In Veracity,” Spencer correlated mendacity to despotism, arguing that despotism in Central American created “Indians” who “saw no vice in lying.”<sup>36</sup> But if mendacity was the product of social structures, not biology, then social ills could be cured through social reform: Social scientific race theories provided both the problem and the solution.

Nicasio Idar’s views on race and ethnicity are best understood through the prism of the social science of the late nineteenth century. He associated community uplift with the improvement of *la raza*, which could mean both the betterment of his people (who he shared with a language, a culture, and a history) via education and economic betterment. Yet he still subscribed to all the ethnic and racial connotations which social scientists of the moment insisted were the markers of progress—sobriety, thrift, whiteness, purity of blood. In a series of article published in 1910 and 1911, Nicasio used the word “*sangre*” to refer to both the blood ties that bonded Mexicans in the border region and the quality of their individual makeup that needed to be improved in them. It was not always clear if Nicasio was referring to blood metaphorically, biologically, or both. In an article titled, “Esfuerzo supremo: la idea mueve,” he promoted universal education as the means by which Mexicans would reach “the height of the most cultured races on earth.”<sup>37</sup> Another article, “A la raza mexicana del Estado de Texas,” called on the community to fill the nerves of the “Mexican-Texas youth” with pride in an effort to extirpate “from their blood,” the “docile, submissive, timid...humble, and modest” behavior in them. He proceeded to write that the Mexican race “had in its veins the virile, vigorous, patriotic *sangre* of Cuauhtémoc, and ...the

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<sup>36</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, Introduction by Tibor R. Machan (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics Press, 1978), 160-175. Originally published in 1897.

<sup>37</sup> “Esfuerzo supremo: ‘La idea mueve,’” *La Crónica*, September 3, 1910, 6.

noble, prideful *sangre* of the descendants of Hernán Cortés.”<sup>38</sup> Insisting on his conviction about the possibility to uplift the Mexican race, Nicasio stated his goal for the future:

To develop the new spirit in our Mexican youth, it is also necessary that they resemble their parents, as little as possible in temperament. There must be a marked improvement from father to son. Let it be noted that the defects of the father were progressively corrected in his descendants.<sup>39</sup>

Nicasio’s observations appear quite similar to late-nineteenth-century populist reformers who, historian Charles Postel reminds us, “understood that the transformation they sought required the uprooting of rural ignorance, inertia, and force of habit.”<sup>40</sup>

In the same article, he expressed concern for the less respectable ethnic Mexicans, observing that among the “thousands of Mexicans in the state of Texas some [were] good, some bad, [some... gave] respectability to the race [by] stimulating it in study, education and in progress [while others] were... a curse” which denigrate the race.<sup>41</sup> Like many other middle-class leaders, Nicasio worried about the “image” of Mexicans, the majority of whom were low-wage workers. Mexican laborers who did not speak English, and worked the most difficult and lowest paying jobs—picking cotton, harvesting fruit, and grubbing land. Historian Mae Ngai observes that it was during the first two decades of the twentieth century when Mexicans became a “racialized, transnational workforce.”<sup>42</sup> Nicasio believed ethnic Mexicans in the middle and upper-classes had a responsibility to help those below them. He singled out the “Itturrias, Celedonia Garza, Lic. José T. Canales” as exemplars of admirable Mexicans.<sup>43</sup> The professions of the people he chose to

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<sup>38</sup> “A la raza mexicana del Estado de Texas,” *La Crónica*, October 1, 1910, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Nicasio Idar, “El antagonismo de razas es fatal,” *La Crónica*, November 19, 1910, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 129.

<sup>43</sup> “Editorial,” *La Crónica*, May 7, 1910, 2.

praise was telling of his values: a well-connected family of bankers and traders, a county treasurer, and a state representative to the Texas legislature with a law degree, respectively. Of the low-wage ethnic Mexican migrant workers he wrote,

[their] moral, material, and intellectual exaltation ... is our aggrandizement; their humiliation, misery, and ignorance... affect us... If they are good, let us encourage them to continue down the good path; if bad, let us strive to separate them from the bad impulses and their bad habits, making them see the error in which they find themselves.<sup>44</sup>

Like other progressives of the day such as Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois, Nicasio condemned racism and prejudice. Nonetheless, he could not help thinking about community improvement in terms of prejudicial race science. He was clearly influenced by the social scientific ideas he was reading and publishing. He wanted Mexicans in Texas to improve their community by taking active steps to ensure generational progress, slowly eradicating bad temperament through positive action.

*La Crónica* invoked the language of uplift to reach all its Mexican readers, regardless of nationality; yet the paper also deployed another discourse specific to those born in the United States: the language of whiteness. Nicasio invoked the language of “whiteness,” to affirm the American citizenship granted to Mexicans in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe—what some have referred to as “white by treaty.”<sup>45</sup> In an article, “La cuestión de razas en Texas,” Nicasio criticized the English language press for constantly writing about the “hierarchy of races that populate the

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<sup>44</sup> N. Idar, “El antagonismo de razas es fatal,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Critical America (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Ariela J. Gross, “Texas Mexicans and the Politics of Whiteness,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (2003): 195–205; Ariela Julie Gross, “‘The Caucasian Cloak’: Mexican Americans and the Politics of Whiteness in the 20th Century Southwest,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 95 (2006); Thomas A. Guglielmo, “Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1212–37.

state, making distinctions of ‘white men’ and ‘Mexicans.’”<sup>46</sup> He asked, “[d]o not both enjoy the same rights under the law of equality?” He argued that “white” was not simply a color marking some phenotypic attribute; it was also a legal category defined by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which granted citizenship to all Mexican nationals who chose to stay in the territory the U.S. annexed in 1848.<sup>47</sup> “[I]n the treaties between Mexico and the United States, Mexicans have been classified as white men,” he wrote, using the treaty to defend citizenship rights for Mexicans. This argument was based on legal precedent. Thirteen years before, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized this argument in the famous court case: *In Re Ricardo Rodríguez*.

In May 1896, Ricardo Rodríguez, who was born in Mexico, appeared before a federal district court seeking to naturalize his citizenship status after having lived in Texas for ten years. The court case soon turned into a referendum on whether Tejanos were eligible for naturalization and would be able to enjoy full citizenship, including the right to vote.<sup>48</sup> Opposing Rodríguez’ petition were two attorneys, Jack Evans and T.J. McMinn, who argued that citizenship was restricted only to white and black people residing in the United States. Mexicans were racially ambiguous and therefore caught between the black-white legal binary. *In Re Ricardo Rodríguez* was a fascinating case because the defendant, Ricardo Rodríguez, insisted he was a “pure-blooded Mexican,” thereby invoking his Mexican nationality and ethnicity as his race. He stood firm in this belief and did not budge when the lawyers tried to get him to specify whether he was “Spanish” or “Indian.” According to legal scholar Julie Gross, lawyers from San Antonio tried to disqualify

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<sup>46</sup> “La Cuestión de Razas en Texas, *La Crónica*, August, 6, 1910, 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Teresa Palomo Acosta, “In Re Ricardo Rodríguez,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/in-re-ricardo-rodriguez>. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

him from whiteness claiming that he was not white whether one used a scientific classification or the classifications, “commonly used and understood in the every-day life of our people.” The lawyers argued that in either case “he should be denied the right of citizenship.”<sup>49</sup> In the end, neither appearance nor biology dictated the outcome. Judge Thomas S. Maxey of the Fifth Circuit Court ruled that since 1836, “the Republic of Texas and the United States had by various collective acts of naturalization conferred upon Mexicans the rights and privileges of American citizenship.”<sup>50</sup> Summarizing the decision, Gross writes, “[the] case held that although Mexicans were probably not white according to anthropology, the proper reading of the 1848 treaty gave Mexicans broad citizenship rights, hence eligibility for naturalization.”<sup>51</sup> Treaties, not phenotype, ruled the day.

Nicasio followed the legal argument that considered Mexicans *de jure* white but he also acknowledged the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* understandings of race. “We do not have one objection to being called Mexican, even though we are American citizens; [we do not have one objection to] Anglo-Saxons being called American... We only object when ‘white..’ is used for Anglo-Saxon and not the Mexican.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, “Mexican” could serve as a marker of a distinct category connoting common origins, a shared Spanish language, and a particular culture that was separate from Anglo-Saxon. Yet if white meant racially neutral, then they

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<sup>49</sup> Ariela Julie Gross, “‘The Caucasian Cloak,’ 14-16. See also, Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, American Crossroads (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013)..

<sup>50</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, Teresa Palomo Acosta, "IN RE RICARDO RODRIGUEZ," accessed February 26, 2019, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pqitw>. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Modified on February 15, 2019. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>51</sup> Gross, “Texas Mexicans and the Politics of Whiteness,” 198.

<sup>52</sup> “La cuestión de razas en Texas, August, 6, 1910, 3.

considered themselves white. Implicit in *La Crónica*'s discourse on race was the principle that Mexicans should not occupy the same category as African-Americans. In May 1910, a few months prior to publishing "La cuestión de razas," *La Crónica* reprinted an article from *The Pecos Valley News* reporting that the Mexican government planned to introduce "twenty thousand blacks [*negros*] to Mexico in order to distribute them on the coffee plantations of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec."<sup>53</sup> Below the reprinted story Nicasio wrote:

Our opinion is that the Mexican government should not introduce into the country... a race that *would not* be an element of progress or respectability... Mixing with the Mexican race would result in the degeneration of [the Mexican people]... Mexico does not need to add the 'black problem'... Better to stop Mexican immigration to the United States [or if possible] repatriate a large quantity of Mexicans who reside in this country, intelligent men like the agricultural workers, railroad workers, artisans, [and] industrialists.<sup>54</sup>

The newspaper certainly used the language of whiteness to claim legal rights for Mexicans in the United States, but when trying to forge a bond between Mexicans at large—what was referred to as *la raza mexicana*—it emphasized the shared bonds between ethnic Mexicans born in Mexico and those born in the United States. Nicasio envisioned *La Crónica* as a newspaper for the whole *raza mexicana*, yet such a broad category contained internal divisions that needed to be defined and overcome. As a means of distinguishing between citizen and non-citizen, he used certain mixed terms. For example, the terms *México-Texano* and *México-Americano* differentiated between Mexicans who were born in Texas, or other areas of the United states, from those who were in the U.S. on a more temporary basis. When referring to Mexican nationals, he often used an insightfully descriptive expression, "*netamente Mexicano*," roughly translating as "total" or "entirely Mexican." Idar grouped both categories—*México-Texanos* and *netamente mexicanos*—

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<sup>53</sup> *La Crónica*, May 14, 1910, 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* [emphasis mine].

into *la raza Mexicana*.” Terms like México-Texano, México-Americano, or netamente mexicano were deployed to highlight divisions not apparent to outsiders who viewed Mexicans as a monolith. Historian Ramón Gutiérrez reminds us that interethnic terms not only “emerge...from above through the actions of states and elites, but... also percolate upward from below, as acts of popular mobilization and consciousness in direct opposition to state actions.”<sup>55</sup> *La Crónica* deployed these interethnic categories, based on everyday understandings, to mobilize a diverse pan-Mexican community.

Blood ties and common cause united the two groups, but always with self-anointed elites in positions of leadership. The words they used to portray Mexican laborers revealed a tension between the respect they had for their “*hermanos de sangre*” and the uncomfortable belief that their community was in a position of arrested development. This situation, they felt, needed to be addressed.

#### *Finding Solidarity in Troubled Times*

*La Crónica*, used interethnic categories and racial discourses increasingly towards the end of 1910 and beginning of 1911, to make sense of the violence and prejudice being deployed against ethnic Mexicans. On November 12, 1910, Nicasio published “Barbarismos,” in response to the murder of Antonio Rodríguez in Rocksprings, Texas (a town 130 miles northwest of San Antonio).<sup>56</sup> On

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<sup>55</sup> Ramón A. Gutiérrez, “What’s in a Name? The History and Politics of Hispanic and Latino Panethnicities,” in *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-First Century Perspective* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 21.

<sup>56</sup> “Barbarismos: un mexicano que mata una mujer quemado vivo,” November 12, 1910, 1. In, Juan González and Joseph Torres, *News For All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, the authors attribute the article to Jovita Idar, Nicasio’s daughter. This may be true, but the original article is unauthored, meaning it most likely was written by Nicasio. Juan González and Joseph Torres, *News For All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, (New York, Verso: 2011), 22. On Nicasio’s authorship of all unattributed articles see, “Revista católica,” *La Crónica*, February 5, 1910, 1.

November 2<sup>nd</sup>, twenty-year-old Rodríguez was accused of killing a white woman named Lem Henderson. He was arrested, jailed, and held for trial, but his day in court never arrived. Two days after his arrest, he was taken by an angry mob, hanged, and burned alive.<sup>57</sup> Scholars have studied this case in detail, outlining the racial prejudice at play, and the denial of due process.<sup>58</sup> Nicasio condemned the Rodríguez' lynching, but also used the violence to enter into a larger conversation about barbarity, uplift, and ethnic Mexican unity.

In "Barbarismos," Nicasio focused on the reaction of ethnic Mexicans to the lynching. Citing the *San Antonio Daily News*, he informed his readers that Mexico City residents responded to the lynching with protests against the United States. They looted American stores, attacked U.S. citizens, threatened to destroy a printing press at the office of the newspaper *El Imparcial*, and tore down American flags. *El Diario del Hogar*, a Mexico City newspaper, corroborated the anti-U.S. sentiment in Mexico, attributing Rodríguez' murder to the, "giants of the dollar, pygmies of culture, and barbarous whites of the north."<sup>59</sup> Nicasio wrote of the protests that:

[Their] impulsive ... attitude shows us that in the Mexican homeland there exists, ... in certain groups, a love for Mexicans who [have been] forced to migrate [showing us] that there are some hearts that beat in unison with the hearts of their brothers across the river, a symptom we are flattered to know and feel.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "Barbarismos: un mexicano que mata una mujer quemado vivo," November 12, 1910, 1. See also, *Handbook of Texas Online*, Rebeca Anne Todd Koenig, "Rodríguez, Antonio," Texas State Historical Association, accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fro99>.

<sup>58</sup> Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), Chapter 1; Nicholas Villanueva, *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 53-78.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> "Barbarismos: un mexicano que mata una mujer quemado vivo," 1.

Nicasio encouraged Mexico City residents to continue condemning the lynching of Rodríguez, “[w]ith all the energy in their capacity.” But he also provided a word of caution, warning ethnic Mexicans everywhere not to respond to barbarity in kind, for such actions would confirm negative stereotypes disseminated by the American press. He singled out John Kenneth Turner for his portrayal of “the Mexican race as a nation of barbarians, whose only ambition is liquor, gambling, and bullfighting.” In 1909, Turner had published *Barbarous Mexico* an expose on Mexico’s exploitative labor regime in the Yucatán peninsula. *La Crónica* published numerous articles deploring the report, criticizing it for portraying Mexicans in a bad light and creating animosity against them. He believed uncivilized actions, like those in Mexico City, corroborated negative stereotypes of ethnic Mexicans and subject them to the barbarity Rodríguez encountered in Rocksprings, Texas.

Throughout 1911 *La Crónica* increasingly focused on the prejudice perpetrated against ethnic Mexicans in Texas. On January 26, 1911, Clemente Idar condemned the practice of segregation in Texas schools and highlighted the clash between ethnic Mexicans who deserved certain rights as citizens and Mexican nationals (*netamente Mexicanos*), who possessed certain legal rights due to international agreements between the United States and Mexico:

On the one hand, we Mexicans who were born in this country, despite our American nationality, do not fully enjoy the privileges and guarantees of the Federal Constitution. On the other hand, the *netamente mexicanos* are also denied the rights and prerogatives that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico mutually agreed to... the result being that *mexicanos* and *méxico-americanos*, are in the same situation.<sup>61</sup>

Despite efforts to argue that Mexicans were legally white, Clemente understood that Anglo-Americans in Texas did not make distinctions based on citizenship, but rather on a racial schema

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<sup>61</sup> Clemente N. Idar, “Segundo Articulo,” *La Crónica*, January 26, 1911, 3.

that viewed all non-Anglo-Saxon people as inferior. This racial hierarchy was exemplified in a letter published in *La Crónica* on February 9, 1911. The writer, a reader from Smithville, in Bastrop County, Texas recounted an encounter his Mexican father had with the head of a segregated school district. The story was reported as a dialogue:

Father: When will this school open?

School Commissioner: We don't know.

Father: Will my children be able to attend?

School Commissioner: The school does not admit colored children.

Father: Am I black?

School Commissioner: No. Colored.

Father: And you?

School Commissioner: [I am] White.

Father: White is not a color?<sup>62</sup>

Readers most likely understood the witticism created by the father's clever line of questioning. The father backed the commissioner into a corner, revealing the power dynamics just below the surface of the seemingly benign racial ascriptions. "White" for the school commissioner was a racial category, not a color. The Mexican father understood this, but offered a literal interpretation of the commissioner's words to poke fun: if black was a color, and white was a color, then were not all people, including the white school commissioner, "colored?" Both men knew this was not the case. They understood words like "white" and "colored" were not innocuous signifiers. "Colored" was associated with Black people in Texas, a community marginalized, downcast, and discriminated against using a myriad of *de facto* and *de jure* policing mechanisms, laws, and customs. Black was an identity the father did not claim, embody, or want to be associated with.

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<sup>62</sup> "La exclusión en las escuelas de los condados de Frio, Bee, Hays, Bastrop, Comal, Caldwell, Blanco, etc. etc.: fragmentos de una voluminosa correspondencia," *La Crónica*, February 9, 1911, 1. Many of the articles in *La Crónica* did not include the author. Yet Nicasio wrote that any unattributed articles were authored by the editor (himself). While he may have outsourced some of this work to his children, we can safely assume that he stood by all the words written in the authorless columns. See "Revista católica," *La Crónica*, February 5, 1910, 1.

Despite *La Crónica's* efforts to cast Mexicans as de jure whites, Anglo-Americans saw Mexicans as “colored” not white.

A similar article published later in the month reported on the sermons given by one Reverend W.M. Jones. Preaching before a group of Anglos and Mexicans in Stockdale, Jones claimed that Mexicans came from African ancestry. *La Crónica* editorialized that Jones was a well-known segregationist who wanted to colonize the Philippines with African-Americans and supported the segregation of Japanese and Chinese students in California.<sup>63</sup> According to the article, Jones wanted the state to enact a law segregating Mexicans into separate public schools because they were from the “caste of the black race.”<sup>64</sup> *La Crónica* challenged this idea by providing a brief history lesson on the origins of the Mexican race, which emerged from the mixing of the Spanish and indigenous peoples of the Americas. Citing Juan de Mariana’s 1855 *General History of Spain*, the article explained that the Spanish were either from the Phoenician race or the Greek race, hence (to them) not black. Addressing the racist minister directly, the essay continued:

However erudite you are Mr. Jones, you cannot prove the black lineage of Mexicans, in either their Spanish or indigenous origins. When your ancestors were barbarians, ours were consuls and senators who wore on their chest a Golden Fleece, enhancing magnificently their proud figure. When our ancestors raised their...eloquent voices in public tribunals, yours dug the earth looking for potatoes to feed themselves. Anglo-Saxons descend from one branch of Germans, the Teutonic family, [who were] basically barbarians without culture.<sup>65</sup>

The sharp rebuttal, laden with positivistic reasoning, and prejudice against other races, was part of a larger ideology about ethnic Mexican identity that was becoming more salient in the racially charged borderlands of Texas.

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<sup>63</sup> “El Rev. WM. Jones da una conferencia,” *La Crónica*, January 26, 1911, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid; For a follow-up on Reverend Jones see, “Fundación de un club para perseguir a Jones,” *La Crónica*, March 2, 1911, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Four months later, yet another act of violence against an ethnic Mexican appeared on the front page of *La Crónica*. On June 29, 1911, Nicasio published, “Cobarde, informe e inhumano lynchamiento de un jovencito mexicano en Thorndale” denouncing the murder of a fourteen-year old boy, Antonio Gómez. A young boy weighing under 100 pounds, Gómez was cutting a shingle with his knife when two men confronted and ordered him to stop cutting. *La Crónica* reported that the boy stood up, knife in hand, “and perhaps in an involuntary movement to shield himself from a strike from the German, wounded him affecting the artery in the upper part of his heart.”<sup>66</sup> A half-hour later the German died. Gómez was arrested and taken to jail by Constable Bob McCoy. Idar explained how Constable Bob McCoy put a chain around the boy’s neck and placed him in the care of the newly deputized Wilfred Wilson. McCoy soon left to find a car to drive Gómez to nearby Cameron County because he feared that people might want to lynch the boy. While McCoy was gone, a group of men seized Gómez and “disappeared in the darkness dragging the boy with the chain...around his neck.” Gómez was killed and according to one eye-witnesses, died from several blows to the head and then from a ladder.<sup>67</sup>

Nicasio described the violence as “acts of cruelty and savagery...burning them alive or lynching them...excluding them from public schools, robbing them infamously of their work, insulting them in a million ways.” He viewed such acts as harmful to all of society, a “vile deceiver that poisons the entire Texas-American organism...it is the apple of discord in the Texan tree, it is the serpent that poisons...the magnanimous aspirations of all good Americans.” He cautioned his readers that a “great part of the Texan-American population” had a “deep-rooted hatred” [and that

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<sup>66</sup> Nicasio Idar, “Cobarde, informe e inhumano lynchamiento de un Jovencito mexicano en Thorndale, Milan. Co.,” *La Crónica*, June 29, 1911, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

the] uncultured... ignorant American... lets himself be guided by the prejudice that he feels against the Mexican, simply for being Mexican.”<sup>68</sup>

Nicasio launched *La Crónica* as a paper to instill free-thinking ideals amongst ethnic Mexicans and to unite and uplift them through education, however, beginning in the fall of 1910, the paper’s focus increasingly veered towards problems encountered by ethnic Mexicans including the segregation of ethnic Mexican students in public schools, extralegal violence, and prejudice. As a result, in 1911, the Idar family decided to use their resources—*La Crónica* and the Knights of Honor—to organize a community response to the increasing prejudice, which took form in a convention known as *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista*.

#### *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista*

On January 12, 1911, Clemente N. Idar published a call in *La Crónica*, inviting all the KOH lodges, Texas Masonic lodges, mutual aid groups, “the most illustrious, well-read residents in Texas...the Mexican newspapermen.. and all Mexican consular officers” to Laredo to discuss the future of the ethnic Mexican community in Texas.<sup>69</sup> The invitation came on the heels of a troublesome year as registered in the pages of *La Crónica*, which reported on the exploitation of Mexican workers in Texas agriculture, the lynching of two Mexicans in Central Texas, and the segregation of Mexican children in Texas public schools. The meeting would provide a forum to address the following subjects: extra-legal violence including lynching, school segregation, the creation of bilingual “community schools,” alliances with Mexican diplomats stationed in consular offices in south

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The article originally appeared in January, yet the remaining copy is illegible. It was reprinted in February. See, “A la Orden de honor de Brownsville, Texas,” *La Crónica*, January 12, 1911, 3; “Una excitativa al Primer Congreso Mexicanista de Texas. La organización como único medio práctico” *La Crónica*, February 2, 1911.

Texas, the creation of a women's auxiliary branch of the KOH, Tejano property rights, and a future meeting.<sup>70</sup> These issues represented what Idar believed were the main obstacles to equality, justice, and uplift for ethnic Mexicans. Conspicuously absent from the agenda was the role of Catholicism in the lives of ethnic Mexicans. Anti-clericalism remained a central feature of *La Crónica*, but the meeting's agenda revealed a shift in priorities. The anti-clericalism of Clemente Vivero and Nicasio Idar's generation (including de la Peña) was receding in the minds of a new generation of ethnic Mexicans, born at the turn of the century in Texas, and facing new enemies.

Scholars of Mexican American history have referred to El Primer Congreso Mexicanista as one of the first attempts at combining Mexican associations—made up of Mexicans and Tejanos—into one group to fight discrimination. Others note how the conference was an overt expression of “Mexican American” civil rights consciousness. Still others claim it reflected the liminal period in which ethnic Mexican leaders were “caught in the borderlands between American and Mexican nationalism.”<sup>71</sup> In the context of this dissertation, the crucial characteristic of the event was its commitment to cross-class solidarity.<sup>72</sup>

The attendees to the conference were members of a middling sector of border society, composed of journalists, teachers, skilled workers, and merchants who served a mostly Mexican

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<sup>70</sup> “A la Orden de honor de Brownsville, Texas,” *La Crónica*, January 12, 1911, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 53.

<sup>72</sup> David Gutiérrez referred to El Primer Congreso as an early attempt to unite mutual-aid and fraternal associations; José A. Hernández referred to it as a union of “contending Chicano societies.” David Montejano called it “A gathering of four hundred Texas Mexican leaders—journalists, school teaches, and mutual aid society representatives—gathered in Laredo in 1911 to draft some plan of action.” See, David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 96; José A. Hernández, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, Fla: Krieger, 1983), 61; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 116.

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 53.

cliente. While there is not a full list of the attendees, of the twenty speakers during the conference, five were teachers, five editors/journalists, and one was a merchant.<sup>73</sup> The group was almost entirely without lawyers, politicians, government employees—what might be referred to as a “professional” middle class. This absence of a professional class in south Texas was noted as late as 1930 by Paul S. Taylor. In his study of Nueces County in south Texas, Taylor noted that Mexicans were beginning to rise into the ranks of the professional class but that even then, “[t]hese persons were numerically but a fraction of the total Mexican population.”<sup>74</sup> The leaders who attended El Primer Congreso were tied to the poor and working-class members of their community and the strategies of the convention reflected this reality.

El Primer Congreso was organized as part of the KOH’s annual convention, which was held every year on the week celebrating Mexican Independence. In July of 1911, *La Crónica* reported that they expected some 300-400 people to attend.<sup>75</sup> Laredo was particularly well-suited for the meeting because it contained a sizeable merchant class catering to Mexicans on both sides of the border.<sup>76</sup> The Idar family collected \$118.77 (approximately \$3,259.53 dollars in 2021 dollars) to purchase chairs, rent and decorate a hall, pay musicians, and print promotional

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<sup>73</sup> Teachers included Professors, A. Maldonado (Gonzalez, Texas); Lisandro Peña (Laredo); S.G. Domínguez (unknown); Timoteo F. Gloria (Corpus Christi), Severo E. Peña (Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas). Editors include, Nicasio Idar (*La Crónica*, Laredo, Texas); Rafael E. Guevara (*El Defensor del Obrero*, Laredo, Texas); Luis G. Alvarado (*El Defensor del Obrero*, Laredo, Texas); José María Mora (*Evolución*, Laredo, Texas—distinct from the Idar’s *Evolución*); Justo Cárdenas (*El Demócrata Fronterizo*, Laredo, Texas). Francisco Armendariz was a merchant and member of Obreros Igualdad y Progreso.

<sup>74</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 178.

<sup>75</sup> Una gran convención se reúne en Laredo, *La Crónica*, July 27, 1911, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Limón, “El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911,” 181-182.

materials.<sup>77</sup> Enough money was collected that they eventually published an article titled, “Don’t Send Us Money for the Congress.”<sup>78</sup>

On September 14, 1911, at least 48 delegates from the KOH, representing twenty-four Texas localities, met in a building located in Laredo’s town square, Los Altos del Mercado. Representatives from “Masonic lodges, mutual-aid societies... political groups, special visitors, delegates from Mexico, press representatives, and ordinary visitors all gathered under one roof”.<sup>79</sup> The event itself was a mix of speeches given in a baroque rhetorical style along with “discussions and conferences,” which scholar José E. Limón likened to modern day academic workshops.<sup>80</sup> Limón highlighted eight themes articulated in the conference: 1) unity against the oppressor, 2) radical working class ideology, 3) the Spanish language and Mexican culture, 4) criminal justice reform 5) the education of women and children 6) social discrimination experienced by Texas-Mexicans 7) communitarian economic policies and 8) formal protests to the state in regard to Mexican prejudice.<sup>81</sup> These were all subjects directed at improving the lives of the poor and middle-class ethnic Mexicans.

Chief amongst these problems was anti-Mexican violence. One of the first actions members took was to collect \$17.35 cents for the legal defense fund of León Cárdenas Martínez (approximately \$476.15 dollars in 2021 dollars).<sup>82</sup> Cárdenas was no older than sixteen when he

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<sup>77</sup> “Corte de Caja,” *La Crónica*, March 2, 1911, 5

<sup>78</sup> No se nos mande dinero para el Congreso, *La Crónica*, September 7, 1911, 4.

<sup>79</sup> José E. Limón, “El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Contemporary Chicanismo,” in *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Francisco H. Vázquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 179.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Woods, “León Cárdenas Martínez, Jr., Trial,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/leon-cardenas-martinez-jr-trial>. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

was accused of killing a white woman in Pecos, Texas. His arrest was deemed suspect by ethnic Mexicans in Texas. Martínez was sentenced to death, but on appeal, was sentenced to thirty years on prison.<sup>83</sup>

Violence, discrimination, and segregation of the Mexican masses were foremost in the minds of those gathered for the convention. In the wake of the murders of Rodríguez and Gómez, the story of León Cárdenas Martínez felt like part of a larger pattern of targeted violence against ethnic Mexicans. This violence revealed the tenuous position of Mexicans in the prejudicial landscape of the Lonestar state. In a letter published in the convention minutes, an ethnic Mexican residing in Texas explained the tension between hope and reality for migrants coming to Texas:

Day by day one sees large groups of Mexicans crossing the Rio Bravo, who, eager to receive the higher salaries to support their families, go to Texas, and although it is true that they find enough to eat and dress well...it is also true that they are frequently treated with a shameful contempt by Americans who treat them like a degenerate and uncultured race.<sup>84</sup>

Unsurprisingly in a crowd of Freemasons and teachers, education reform was also a central concern. In his speech, Professor Simón G. Domínguez, from the Respectable Sociedad, “*Hijos de Juárez*,” promoted bi-lingual schools which prioritized Spanish education first, then English. He also championed the education of ethnic Mexican women so that “she may mold the delicate mind of her children and she may occupy a distinguished position in social life.”<sup>85</sup> Soledad de la Peña, a woman who we know little about, argued that women’s education would “foster civic motherhood”<sup>86</sup> In her analysis of the congress, historian Gabriela González examined the gendered

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<sup>83</sup> Limón, “El Primer Congreso,” 174.

<sup>84</sup> *Primer Congreso Mexicanista Verificado En Laredo, Texas, EE. UU. de A. Los Días 14 al 22 de Septiembre de 1911. Discursos y Conferencias. Por La Raza y Para La Raza.* (Laredo, Texas: Tipografía de N. Idar, 1912), 14.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 262.

language used by Soledad de la Peña. Did she conceive of her struggle for rights through the prism of male patriarchy? Or did she develop a “nuanced political strategy” in order to fight “racial discrimination...within the structures of patriarchy?”<sup>87</sup> González posits that women like de la Peña carefully constructed arguments that could soothe “potentially threatened male egos.”<sup>88</sup>

Working-class adults were also on the minds of many in attendance. José María Mora urged attendants to unite the working-class element against “capital.” A well-known socialist in the region, representing the labor club *Sociedad de Obreros Igualdad y Progreso*, Mora reminded listeners of the older organization he was a part of (most likely the Federal Labor Union of Laredo) which so threatened the established order that the capitalists “persecuted the workers, until the organization was exterminated.”<sup>89</sup> Mora claimed capital and wealthy politicians were threatened by organizations which served the interests of working-class people. He urged the members to “unite the working class, especially us Mexicans who reside in this country.”<sup>90</sup> As most attendants, Mora embraced mutualism and fraternity as the most efficient methods to address inequities. Responding to a question on how to fight against the exploitation of Mexican workers, Mora responded succinctly, with “fraternity,” going on to explain there was a reason why all mutual-aid and fraternal societies had as their motto ““all for one, and one for all” ... [because they know] mutualism is the base of everything.” The worker would benefit greatly from living under the principle of fraternity, Mora explained: “be they called Knights of Honor, Woodmen of the World, or whatever.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Limón, “El Primer Congreso, 180.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> *Primer Congreso Mexicanista Verificado En Laredo*, 17.

Reverend Pedro Grado, from Seguin, Texas, also wanted to unite the various societies in Texas to address worker exploitation and oppression against Mexicans. He argued that “[t]he Congress will grow significantly and its results will be admired, if it succeeds in uniting all the secret Masonic societies whose members are our compatriots; or if the Lodges [we form] have [a Masonic] character.” Professor Domínguez also recommended unity for “the moral and intellectual improvement of the race,” achievable by following a series of instructions. “How should the Mexicans in Texas combat the influences that block their moral, material, and intellectual and cultural development?” he asked rhetorically. “Form societies” he explained and form them in every locale where one finds “seven individuals of our race, ensuring that in their bosom the most holy expression of fraternal affection reigns.” He went on, “How should they initiate an efficient campaign of fraternity or union of the Mexican element and Mexican-Texan?” “By creating a Masonic congress, in any population in Texas unit[ing] them into a single body” he answered. He ended his speech with a call to unite the seven Mexican societies of Laredo: “Benito Juárez,” “Ignacio Zaragoza,” “Knights of Honor,” “Wood Men of the World, Camp Ahuehuate,” “Sociedad Hijos de Juárez Mutualista,” “Sociedad de Obreros de Igualdad y Progreso,” and the recently formed “Club Internacional Mexicano.”<sup>92</sup> The conference speeches reveal how the Freemason ideals were transported and adapted to a border society suffering the negative effects of modernity: prejudice, exploitation, and extra-legal violence, yet still hopeful that cross-class associations could address these obstacles on the path to a modern future. Such was the vision of ethnic Mexican leaders in south Texas: the formation of worker-oriented corporate bodies, tied by a Mexican heritage, but focused on a modern, cooperative future.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 20.

The meeting ended with the agreement to organize a state-wide *La Gran Liga Mexicanista de Beneficencia y Protección*. In typical fashion, attendants drafted a constitution and elected officers to a Board of Directors. But this is where the life of this grand fusion ended. There was no meeting in 1912, likely the result of the surge in violence and chaos caused by the Mexican Revolution. Nonetheless, in many ways this meeting served as an inflection point for the Idar family and border society. The transition away from anti-clerical messaging and towards a focus on exploited workers was obvious in both *La Crónica* and the organizations associated with the Idar family. The younger Idars were also coming into their own, making a name for themselves as journalists and border leaders. As Mexico descended into civil war and the United States stood on the precipice of entering World War I, they found new opportunities to serve their ethnic Mexican community.

*The War Years: Rallying to both Fronts*

On November 20, 1910, in the city of San Antonio, Texas, Francisco I. Madero initiated a revolt against Mexican President Porfirio Díaz—the country’s dictator since 1876. A wealthy businessman from the northern state of Coahuila, Madero had been exiled in San Antonio after challenging Díaz’ power by publicly running against him in the 1910 presidential election. Madero succeeded and within six months Díaz resigned; but this was only the beginning of a revolution which turned into a civil war that would last, militarily at least, until 1917. During the war, hundreds of thousands of lives were lost or fled the country, many crossing the Rio Grande and settling in Texas. The border region of northern Mexico and western Texas became the site of much of the violence, greatly affecting ethnic Mexican communities in the border region.

Residents of Laredo, Texas felt the turmoil in myriad ways. They witnessed battles in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Laredo's sister city, from the rooftops of city buildings.<sup>93</sup> They saw Laredo's population increased dramatically, as "the chaos of the revolution pushed more immigrants into the newly developed agricultural regions in south Texas [where] [c]onflicts between them and the new entrepreneurs from the Midwest broke out."<sup>94</sup> Between 1910 and 1920 the population of Laredo rose from 14,855 to 22, 710. They witness violence on the U.S. side of the border too. In 1915, Texas Rangers discovered a plan in San Diego, Texas, near Laredo, calling for an uprising against Anglo-Americans in the region. The Plan de San Diego, as it came to be known, catalyzed a bloody conflict that killed hundreds in the border region.<sup>95</sup> The Mexican Revolution presented the Idar and other border residents with a new opportunity to strengthen bonds with ethnic Mexicans.

Members of the Idar family backed Venustiano Carranza who served as Madero's Commander in Chief during the initial revolt and later took over the movement when, after attempted revolts by Félix Díaz and General Bernardo Reyes, General Victoriano Huerta assassinated Madero on February 22, 1913. A family friend of the Idars, Leonor Villegas de Magnón's, documented the Idar family's support for Carranza in her novel, *The Rebel*, based on her participation in the Mexican Revolution. Villegas de Magnón was a longtime resident of the border region who claimed ties to Spanish lower level nobility, giving her the means and time to

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<sup>93</sup> Gilberto Miguel Hinojosa, *A Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo, 1755-1870* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1983), 121.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

support the Revolution. An original supporter of Madero, she switched her support to Carranza after Huerta's February 1913 coup.<sup>96</sup>

On March 17 1913, Carrancista forces clashed with Huertistas in Nuevo Laredo, rousing Villegas de Magnón and Jovita Idar to cross the river and tend to wounded soldiers on both sides of the battle.<sup>97</sup> According to Villegas de Magnón, Mexico's National Red Cross was under Huertista control and their partisanship manifested in poorer treatment for Carranza's army. Villegas de Magnón decided to establish a separate medical volunteer organization to serve Carranza's soldiers known as *La Cruz Blanca*.<sup>98</sup> For the next five months, *La Cruz Blanca* provided medical attention and supplies to wounded soldiers much like the Red Cross. On January 1, 1914, Carrancista forces once again clashed with Huertistas in Nuevo Laredo, leaving some 600 dead by January 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>99</sup> This time, Villegas de Magnón established a makeshift hospital in her home in Laredo, caring for soldiers who could cross the river and receive aid. She enlisted the service of ten doctors, fifty nurses, along with a number of civilian volunteers.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 85.

<sup>97</sup> Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Clara Lomas, *The Rebel* (Houston, Tex: Arte Público Press, 1994), 239. Villegas de Magnón's publication was originally pitched as a history but multiple publishing agencies passed on the project. She then transformed her work into a novel in order to make it more marketable. Historians have generally used her work to corroborate events associated with La Cruz Blanca. See Ibid Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 95; Sonia Hernández, *Working Women into the Borderlands* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Villegas de Magnón, *The Rebel*, 239. Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 23, 82-83.

<sup>99</sup> González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 93.

<sup>100</sup> Villegas de Magnón, *The Rebel*, 238-239.



Figure 3.2 Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Arcacelito García with Flag of La Cruz Blanca, 1914<sup>101</sup>

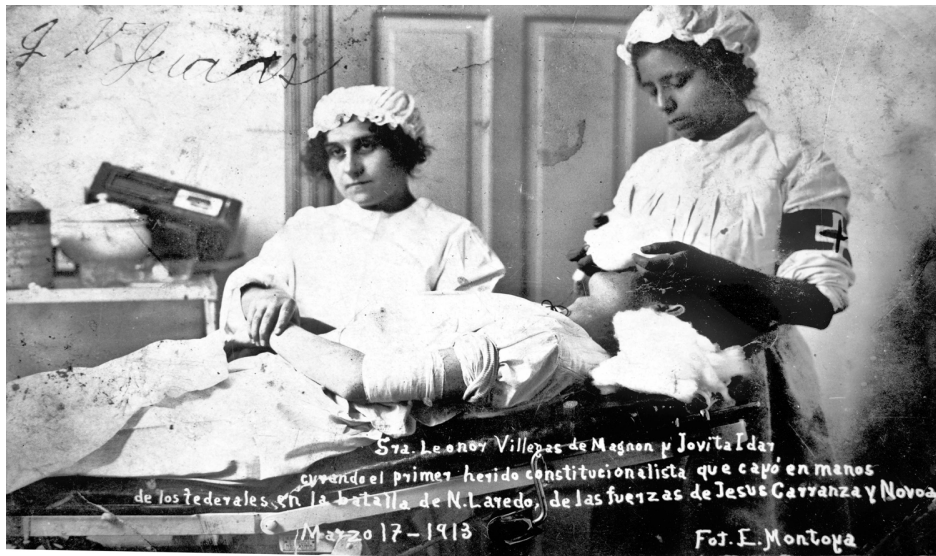


Figure 3.3 Leonor Villegas de Magnón (left) and Jovita Idar (right) treating a patient on March 17, 1913<sup>102</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Leonor and Arcacelito García with flag of La Cruz Blanca, 1914, Box: 7, Folder: 2, Item: 8. Leonor Villegas de Magnón Papers, 2008-015. University of Houston Libraries Special Collections, accessed February 23, 2021, [https://findingaids.lib.uh.edu/repositories/2/archival\\_objects/1787](https://findingaids.lib.uh.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/1787).

<sup>102</sup> Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Jovita Idar, File 084-0597, General Photograph Collection—Institute of Texan Cultures, University of Texas—San Antonio.

All of Nicasio's older children—Clemente, Federico, Jovita, Elvira, and Eduardo Idar—served in La Cruz Blanca for the duration of Carranza's initial campaign, an experience that shaped their lives. Jovita and Elvira Idar were among the volunteer nurses, each taking leadership roles in the organization. Elvira became vice-president of the medical unit and director of the hospitals, while Jovita became the organization's secretary.<sup>103</sup> When Carranza invited Villegas de Magnón to accompany a faction of the revolutionary army, both Federico and Jovita Idar joined the medical brigade.<sup>104</sup> While accompanying Carranza's revolutionary army, Federico decided to remain in Mexico with his mother's relatives in Monterrey, Nuevo León. He parlayed his volunteer work with La Cruz Blanca, into a position working on the national railway in support of Carranza's troops. He spent the rest of his life working in the railroad industry. Clemente Idar also served in la Cruz Blanca as secretary for a time and unofficial advisor to Villegas de Magnón, who held him in high esteem. In her novel, she described an episode when Clemente, "arose and made a brilliant speech [adding] He could sway the multitudes in English and Spanish."<sup>105</sup>

By August of 1914, Villegas de Magnón and the Idar progenies had concluded traveling with Carranza's army. By that time, allied with Francisco Villa's northern army and Emiliano Zapata's Southern forces, Carranza successfully entered Mexico City. The entry of the revolutionary forces in the capital did not herald the end of violence along the border. A few months later, in January 1915, the Plan de San Diego was discovered ushering in a year of raids and retaliation by the Texas Rangers. The following year, in March 1916, Pancho Villa, who was

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<sup>103</sup> González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Magnón, *The Rebel*, 238-239.

now Carranza's biggest foe, marched on the border town of Columbus, New Mexico, prompting a retaliatory action from U.S. General Pershing remembered as the Punitive Expedition.

A year later, on April 2, 1917, the United States entered into World War I, providing yet another opportunity for the Idar's to express patriotism, but this time for the United States. Clemente was unable to enlist as a result of the printing press accident that left him without the use of two of his fingers. Instead, he used his public speaking ability to sell war bonds for the government. He became one of the famed "Four Minute Men" who traveled across the state of Texas giving patriotic speeches throughout the border region, in Spanish, encouraging ethnic Mexicans residing in Texas to lend their efforts to the allied cause. In a speech delivered on October 10, 1917, he told ethnic Mexicans to buy war bonds because soldiers needed "footwear, firearms, and so much more [including] the conviction that those who have stayed at home are with them in heart and soul." He asked his audience: "Will We Be Weak Or Will We Be Strong?"<sup>106</sup>

Nearly five months later, on February 29, 1918, Laredo held its yearly George Washington celebration.<sup>107</sup> Clemente tied together the struggles of the great men of the Americas to show the common cause existed between Mexico and the United States. In his speech, Idar praised the border where "they make two races and two civilizations [hailing the] audience composed of... individuals from two great neighboring races." He then told the audience that heroes are universal, "There are no boundaries that can contain the admiration the world owes to the noble... Dolores, Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla; and there are no borders in the hearts of men that have not been

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<sup>106</sup> Conceptos expresados por el Sr. C. N. Idar en los altos de la corte de distrito en el mitin del jueves en la noche," *Evolución*, October 27, 1917, 2.

<sup>107</sup> "Discurso pronunciado por el Sr. Clemente N. Idar, en la celebración de ayer," *Evolución*, February 28, 1918, 1.

traversed by the feats of Bolívar and San Martín.” Connecting the heroes of Latin America, Mexico, and the United States he stated, “Washington, Hidalgo, Bolívar, San Martín, you belong to us all.” Clemente Idar continued to make speeches and sell war bonds throughout the year. On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, he received a letter from John Murray, organizer for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Murray was part of a group within the AFL trying to solidify an alliance with Mexico’s budding labor movement and they wanted to put together a conference in Laredo, Texas, and wanted to know if Clemente would help. He agreed and spent the remainder of his life working for the AFL.

### *Conclusion*

Much changed for the Idar family between 1910 and 1918. On November 13, 1913, the thirty-year-old, Clemente Idar married María Lorenzo “Laura” Dávila in a Methodist church in Corpus Christi, Texas. Upon their return to Laredo, Clemente, Jovita, and Eduardo resumed work with *La Crónica*, but also lent their services to *El Progreso*, a paper owned by Leo Walker and Emeterio Flores.<sup>108</sup> Federico remained in Mexico, eventually accepting a position with the Brotherhood of Conductors, Engineers, Fireman, and Brakemen, a national railroad union in Mexico.

On April 7, 1914, tragedy struck. Nicasio Idar, the patriarch, fell ill, and died of intestinal problems in his home in Laredo. The family soon announced that *La Crónica* would be ending its run. Clemente, Jovita, and Eduardo continued their work in various papers in the border region. Three years later, Eduardo and Jovita Idar began publishing their own newspaper, *Evolución*. This paper was partly funded by Venustiano Carranza who contributed \$1,000 dollars (almost 20,000

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<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 145.

in 2017 currency) via Villegas de Magnón. *Evolución* lasted three years, until 1920. Elvira remained with her widowed mother.

The bonds binding ethnic Mexicans were tested during the period between 1910 and 1918. *La Crónica's* reporting exposed the hardships, discrimination, and violence suffered by ethnic Mexicans at a time of social, demographic, and economic flux. But this was also a formative period, pushing leaders like Nicasio, Clemente, and Jovita Idar, to improvise new approaches towards unifying ethnic Mexicans. The Idars understood that ethnic Mexicans did not hold a stable position in U.S. society. Ethnic Mexicans with the “right” qualities had access to upward mobility, but this mobility was always situational. Mexican American identity, writes Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, resembled that of the *mestizos* of New Spain, “a matter of daily and local negotiation.”<sup>109</sup> Nicasio and his children, negotiated the border world by invoking multiple discourses to unite their ethnic Mexican community. They learned to demand their rights by resorting to the legal precedent of “white by law.” They used the language of *sangre* to create a sense of unity between Mexicans born on both sides of the border. They could not help but imbibe their politics with the language of social science, the *lingua franca* of learned people in the early decades of the twentieth century. They also called a convention of Freemason elders to strategize community-oriented self-defense. And when war broke out on both sides of the border, they modeled a version of ethnic Mexican patriotism that revealed a commitment to both the United States and Mexico. Through the use of these strategies and discourses, the Idars offered a vision of ethnic Mexican solidarity that was rooted in the histories of Mexico and the United States and the conditions on the ground in the

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<sup>109</sup> Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, “Latino/a and Latin America: A Succinct Note on the Reciprocal Intellectual and Political Effects between the Term Latino/a in the United States and the Very Idea of Latin America,” in *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 87.

border region. The following chapter switches focus to Clemente Idar and his vision of ethnic Mexican solidarity, but this time at the border of the U.S. and Mexico's two labor movements.

## Chapter 4: Organizer Idar

*You must understand that such work is not always of the most pleasant character, but on the contrary requires much sacrifice. To be an active worker in the labor movement...means that the ordinary pleasures of life must often be foregone; that humiliation must sometime be endured; that the pointed shaft of the critic must be met with patience, and insult often bourned [sic] in silence, conscious that we are working for the right. The pathway of labor is neither wide nor strewn with roses. On such occasions it is always well to remember the cause for which we are banded together.*

-Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar April, 17, 1920 <sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

In September of 1918, Clemente Idar began working as a general organizer for the American Federation of Labor. From this point on, AFL communication to Clemente was regularly addressed to “Organizer Idar.” This moniker became Clemente’s new identity and the above quote, taken from his commission letter, accurately described the nature of his career. It was a struggle in every sense of the word. All AFL organizers faced a number of challenges trying to organize workers in a political climate that was often hostile to the labor movement’s goals. Yet what made Clemente’s situation particularly formidable was his focus on organizing Mexican labor in the United States. The majority of Mexican workers, mostly migratory laborers, engaged in low-wage, low-respect, seasonal work, usually spoke little to no English, and were the target of prejudice by fellow workers and employers alike. Yet despite these obstacles, Clemente spent his sixteen-year career trying to incorporate ethnic Mexicans into unions associated with the AFL.

By 1920, he had established a plan to accomplish this goal which involved two main strategies. First, he would petition the AFL to actively recruit Mexican workers into the confederation’s unions, particularly in the Southwestern United States. And second, he would push the AFL to work with Mexican labor leaders across the border in order to establish transnational

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 17, April 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, Clemente N. Idar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin (cited herein as CNIP).

labor solidarity. He supported creating a system of mutual recognition between trade unions in each country and extending the jurisdiction of certain AFL International labor unions into Mexico. Clemente was not alone. AFL members like Canuto Vargas, John Murray, and Santiago Iglesias all supported greater cooperation between American and Latin American labor movements, envisioning a world where workers who traveled from Mexico to the U.S. (and vice versa) could find immediate support with a union in an otherwise unfamiliar world. Clemente believed that such a system would prevent employers from paying immigrants low wages, subjecting them to dangerous work conditions, and overwhelming them in onerous debt. It was Clemente's great hope that transnational labor solidarity would prevent Mexican workers from accepting low wages and acting as strikebreakers.

Living on the border, Clemente learned how important Mexican migrant workers were to his ethnic Mexican community residing in the border region. As more Mexican workers migrated to Texas and the southwestern United States more generally, he came to believe that Mexican immigrants were integral to the future of the labor movement in the Southwest. As a result, he used his knowledge of the region and connections with Mexican officials to create solidarity with workers and labor leaders in Mexico. While simple in theory, the task of creating solidarity between workers in Mexico and the United States was a delicate one—complicated as much by the structure of the AFL, as it was by the social norms of the mostly-white labor force in the U.S. Nevertheless, from 1918 onward, Clemente's goal was to incorporate ethnic Mexicans into U.S. labor unions and establish solidarity with the Mexican labor movement.

This new vision differed from the work of his father, Nicasio. As explained in Chapters two and three, Nicasio was an active member of Mexicans mutual-aid and Freemason organizations who promoted ethnic Mexican uplift via education and communal cooperation

within a cross-class coalition of all Mexicans (*la raza mexicana*). Nicasio focused on combatting the entrenched power of the Roman Catholic church and using his newspaper to stimulate communal defense. His tactics were inward-looking; his writings often invoked the language of self-improvement and were coded with underlying assumptions about Mexican backwardness. Clemente continued this work, but in a different form. As a labor organizer, he shifted his gaze towards the structural inequalities within the capitalist labor market. His enemies were not farmers but farming interests, and his ire was directed at the “open-shop” advocates in business and commerce. He believed the road to Mexican uplift lay in the hands of unionized Mexican workers themselves.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Clemente immersed himself in the work. He saw where workers lived, learned about the nature of their work, and got a clear sense of how much they were getting paid to do it.<sup>2</sup> He headed up organizing campaigns, sat on strike committees, and investigated wage rates throughout his territory. This work changed him. He began preaching the gospel of craft unionism, and his efforts gave him access to the inner circles of both Mexico and the U.S.’ most prominent labor leaders.

This is the first of two chapters that together analyze Clemente Idar’s work for the AFL. This first chapter describes Idar’s duties and explain how his organizing efforts fit within the larger structure of the AFL. The work he was asked to do for the AFL, as we will see below, gave him responsibilities well beyond the confines of his position. Focusing on his work provides an insider’s perspective to the AFL’s organization, allowing for a better understanding of the structural obstacles he later faced when trying to incorporate Mexicans into this powerful entity.

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<sup>2</sup> Open Shop refers to a workplace where employees are not required to be part of a union. The Open Shop movement is generally associated with dismantling union power.

Lastly, the chapter will argue that Idar carved out a niche within the AFL by promoting himself as something of a “Mexican specialist.” Beyond revealing his talent for self-promotion, his role also reveals the AFL’s interest in Mexico and its workers. During the 1920s, labor leaders in the U.S. were anxious to understand what path Mexico’s labor movement would take and, as the decade wore on, what role Mexican workers would play in the U.S. labor movement. As we will see, in the following chapters, this was a moment of hope for those who envisioned that path as one of cooperation between Mexican and American workers.

### *Job as Organizer*

Clemente began organizing workers into unions for the AFL in September 1918 yet was not given an official commission until April 17, 1920.<sup>3</sup> With this commission came a set of instructions and regulations that made explicit the responsibilities and goals of an organizer who for the previous two years, he had been learning on the job. His job title was “Organizer and Label Agent” and his responsibilities included: installing local and federal labor unions; initiating union members; inaugurating officers; and promoting “the products of union labor... [and] union labelled products.”<sup>4</sup> He also played a role during labor actions, “adjusting strikes” and addressing “grievances of local unions affiliated directly or indirectly with the American Federation of Labor.”<sup>5</sup> All this was done with the caveat that his work needed to be in accordance “with the

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<sup>3</sup> American Federation of Labor Commission Organizer and Label Agent, 17 April 1920, Box 3, Folder 4, CNIP. See also, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Harry C. Bates, 18 February 1919, Box 1, Folder 1, CNIP.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> This statement can be found in the minutes for the AFL convention from 1919-1931 directly under the heading “Organizing Expenses.” For example, see, American Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Fortieth Annual Convention Held at Montreal, Quebec, Canada June 7<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>, Inclusive, 1920* (Washington D.C.: American Federation of Labor), pg. 31 (hereafter cited as AFL, *Fortieth Proceedings*).

laws of the National or International Union of the trade or calling of which the Union is composed” (more on this briefly).<sup>6</sup>

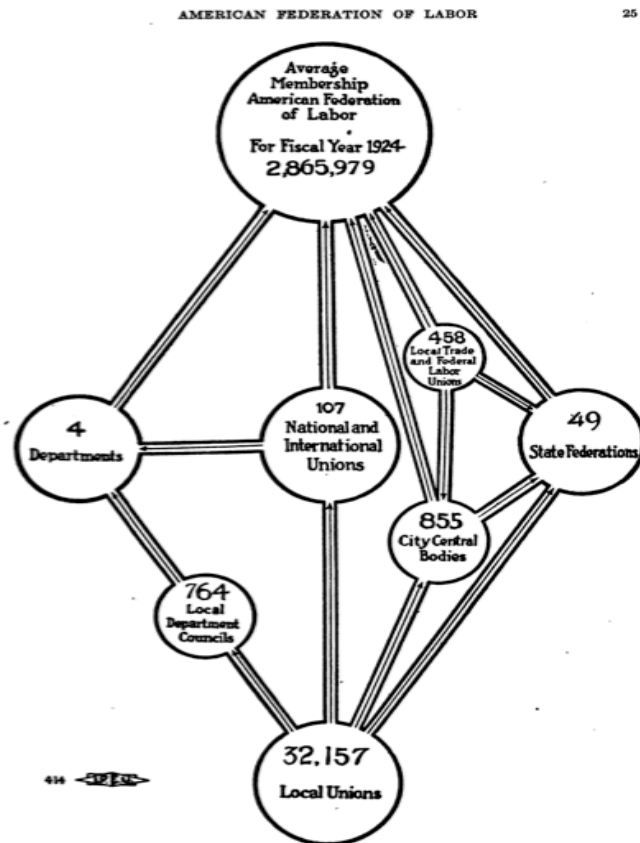


Figure 4.1 AFL’s Organizational Structure <sup>7</sup>

The job of a “general” organizer was made difficult by the fact that the AFL was a decentralized federation with distinct organizational structures and differing levels of power. Importantly, the AFL was not a union in itself, but rather, as its leader described it:

a central labor body bearing the same relation to national and international unions that the Federal Government bears to the states of our Union and the same relation to local unions not identified with national unions that the Federal Government bears to one of our

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> American Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Annual Convention Held at El Paso, Texas November 17<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> Inclusive 1924* (Washington D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1924), 25.

territories...Local unions of a given trade are grouped into the State, National and International bodies, which together constitute the Federation.<sup>8</sup>

The decentralized structure of the Federation allowed organizing bodies to retain some level of autonomy which was a central tenet of trade unionism. Trade unionism was the lodestar of AFL's philosophy and the guiding ideology of the AFL's founder and most important figure, Samuel Gompers. Clemente learned that being an AFL organizer required an almost religious commitment to trade unionism. Gompers explained this commitment in the stock letter he sent to him, as he did all commissioned organizers:

Believing that it is only by organization in the trade union form through its educational, social and fraternal influence that actual advantages, improvements, and reforms can be gained for the masses, it is the intent of the American Federation of Labor to organize thoroughly both the skilled and unskilled workers, wherever and whenever possible.<sup>9</sup>

Trade unionism organized workers by craft, often with the skilled, more remunerative ones able to exert more power because of the leverage they held in the economy. Importantly, the AFL did *not* practice industrial unionism, which placed all workers of a particular industry, regardless of trade, into "one big union."

The One Big Union concept came from the nineteenth century, but was popularized in the U.S. by the AFL's biggest rival, the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW unionized workers regardless of trade under one umbrella and directed their movement towards more radical ends, above all achieving worker control over industry. Gompers, on the other hand, insisted "that

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Gompers quoted in Florence Calvert Thorne, *Samuel Gompers: American Statesman* (Greenwood Press, New York 1957), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 16 April 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

material means to higher standards of living must precede reforms...”<sup>10</sup> He was concerned with “bread and butter” issues including, the eight-hour day and wage increases.

The AFL consisted of loosely related components. Local trade unions formed the basic building blocks of the confederation which were affiliated with national and international trade unions. Alongside these entities were the Central Labor Union (CLU), which coordinated labor action at the city or regional level and the State Federations of Labor (SFL), which did the same work at the state level.<sup>11</sup> Finally there were Federal Labor Unions (FLU) which were only allowed to form if there were too few workers in a particular craft to organize a National or International Trade Alliance. In the words of Secretary of the AFL Frank Morrison, FLUs were,

composed of different crafts and callings that have not sufficient number of members or any one craft or calling to form a trade union. It is a recruiting station for unorganized workers and out of them are to be formed local unions of any craft or calling that have sufficient number to organize. We then affiliate them to their respective national or international union, and if they have none we issue them a special charter with the name that will indicate their membership.<sup>12</sup>

The AFL was cautious about chartering FLUs since they somewhat resembled industrial unions. AFL leaders wanted worker solidarity filtered through craft alliances rather than industry wide workforces. Critics of the trade union system argued that it reified the privileged position of skilled laborers who were often White, Anglo-Saxon, native-born male workers. By allowing trade unions to remain allied, yet separate from unskilled workers, the skilled trades had access to the demographic power (their numbers) of “unskilled” workers without disrupting the unequal labor hierarchy. Trade union advocates believed that the benefits of worker solidarity should trickle up

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<sup>10</sup> Thorne, *Samuel Gompers*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Idar organized the Laredo Central Labor Union in December of 1918 see, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 18 December 1918, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 14 May 1930, Box 3, Folder 13, CNIP.

from one's individual skill rather than down from one's identity as a worker. AFL Executive Officers argued that this decentralized structure created cooperation between locals at the state, regional, national, and international level and ensured that new unions did not encroach on the territory or work of another union. Conflicts over jurisdiction were big topics at the AFL's annual conventions.

For example, in December 1923, Clemente reported to Morrison about "a controversial spirit of serious proportions" occurring in San Antonio between carpenters (United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America) and Sheet Metal Workers (Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers' International Alliance). The two trades were in dispute over the decision by the National Labor Relations Board over jurisdiction of work installing a certain type of window frame (Hollow Sheet Metal Window Frames and Sashes).<sup>13</sup> Members of each trade felt that they had claim to the work for while the material may have consisted of sheet metal, the process of properly installing the windows was the province of carpentry. Typical of the compromises made by governing bodies, the National Board decided "that the setting of hollow metal sash, when ... made of No. 10 gauge metal or lighter, is the work of the Sheet Metal Workers," while heavier gauges were given to carpenters.<sup>14</sup> Carpenters refused to obey this decision and Clemente worried about what such controversy would do to the solidarity of the trade movement, adding that the kerfuffle offered "remarkably good food for the open shopper and contractors who are systematically hostile to labor."<sup>15</sup> The matter was settled by the AFL's executive committee, which threatened to expel the union if they did not follow the ruling. In theory, the AFL's structure allowed for craft disputes to

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<sup>13</sup> These were the parts of a window which hold the glass in place.

<sup>14</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 11 December 1923, CNIP; Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 12 December 1923, CNIP.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

be settled by each union's representatives within the AFL structure. Yet, decentralization also allowed for businesses to play one craft against the other and the AFL believed the former benefit trumped the latter problem.

Clemente quickly learned how this system impeded his work organizing "unskilled" laborers, most of them immigrants from Mexico. He came to believe that his work necessitated working outside the bounds of traditional trade unionism because ethnic Mexican, Spanish-speaking workers needed extra attention that the traditional crafts were unable or unwilling to provide. The bulk of this extra work involved acquiring someone to translate documents and meetings. Without such help, Mexican workers were giving their time, money, and efforts while being unable to secure the full benefits of union membership.

There were also larger structural forces that made traditional trade unionism difficult amongst the Mexicans and Mexican Americans. As historian Emilio Zamora has explained, Mexicans worked in a racialized labor market that segregated and undermined their work and confined them to low-wage jobs through bureaucratic segregation, social pressure, custom, and/or violence. Ethnic Mexicans in the Southwest were overrepresented within the "non-skilled" labor sectors of agriculture, mining, and dock work. "High skill" miners and dockworkers existed, yet ethnic Mexicans were largely confined to the low-skill jobs in these industries. Moreover, native workers viewed Mexicans, regardless of citizenship status, as a threat to their place in the labor hierarchy. Zamora notes, "Anglo organizers normally submitted reports that spoke about Mexican workers as job competitors and strikebreakers."<sup>16</sup> Clemente made the case, at different points during his career, that what was needed to combat this racialized-labor market was a Federal Labor

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<sup>16</sup> Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 187.

Union (FLU) composed of a variety of Mexican workers, regardless of craft, in order to first instruct them in the ideals of trade unionism. He argued *in favor* of placing ethnic Mexicans in segregated FLUs, to address the problems of language and prejudice. However, as Morrison's comments quoted earlier made clear, FLUs were an organizing unit of last resort.

Throughout Clemente Idar's career he was reminded time and again that the AFL was a confederation of labor unions founded on the belief that trade unionism was the fundamental unit of organization in the struggle to better the cause of all laborers around the world. He tried to harmonize his goals to incorporate Mexican workers into the AFL with an overarching trade unionism philosophy that made such work difficult.

#### *Clemente Idar's Work*

Idar was able to make a living as a general organizer for the AFL. According to the 1920 AFL Constitution, his salary was \$10.00 per day including \$8.00 per day for "railroad fare, and hotel expenses ... when traveling away from their home city."<sup>17</sup> This meant he could earn up to \$50 per week or \$2,600 per year (\$640.99/week and \$33,331.22/ year in 2020 dollars).<sup>18</sup> However, a number of factors could—and did—adversely impact his pay. For example, between 1919 and his death in 1934, Idar was furloughed at least three times: on October 9, 1921 and April 1<sup>st</sup> 1922, for one month, and on October 29, 1932 for three days per month until 1933.<sup>19</sup> These furloughs were

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<sup>17</sup> AFL, *Fortieth Proceedings*, 28. See also, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 28 September 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Louise Diaz found that in 1919 (before the 1920 raise), he received \$45.00 a week or \$2,340 a year if fully employed for the year (\$666.92 a week and \$34, 679.88 a year in 2020 dollars). Stephanie Louise Diaz, "Hyphenated Citizen: A Biography of Clemente Idar, The American Federation of Labor's First Mexican-American Organizer, 1918-1934" (Master's Thesis, Edmond, Oklahoma, University of Central Oklahoma, 2013), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 09 September 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP; Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 16 March 1922, Box 3,

imposed upon all organizers after the two major economic crises that rocked the country during the 1920s, namely the Depressions of 1920-1922 and 1929. On other occasions his pay was reduced when he took time off, as happened in January 1919 when “his wife and children fell ill with the influenza epidemic” and he took two days to attend to them. For that week, he received only \$42.00.<sup>20</sup> He was allowed to spend money on incidental expenses so long as these expenditures were given previous authorization by the Morrison, the AFL’s Financial Secretary. The majority of his work was spent in the field and as a result, his paychecks often included reimbursements for travel and incidentals.

Clemente’s main region of operation centered on Texas. According to his brother, Eduardo Idar, this was difficult work because, “[p]ractically, never [had there] been any real important labor movement in Laredo.”<sup>21</sup> On one hand, this neglect made Clemente’s job difficult, on the other, the lack of unions amongst the Spanish-speaking people of Texas allowed him to make impressive gains early in his career. It is difficult to determine exact numbers for how many unions he chartered and how many workers he organized over his sixteen-year career (1918-1934), for reasons which will become apparent below. But there are other ways to gauge his impact.

The first lies in examining the reports he sent to Secretary Morrison, and those he sent to the *American Federationist*, the AFL’s news organ. From those reports we learn that four months after he began working for the AFL, in February 1919, Clemente recounted having organized,

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Folder 10, CNIP; Correspondence from William Green to Clemente Idar, 10 October 1929, Box 3, Folder 6, CNIP.

<sup>20</sup> Diaz, “Hyphenated Citizen,” 74.

<sup>21</sup> Ed Idar, “The Labor Movement in Laredo,” undated (circa 1938), Box 2E309, Folder 13, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, 1845-1954, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

possibly even re-organized, the Laredo Central Labor Union, which had 17 locals.<sup>22</sup> This Laredo's CLU included unions of "carpenters, bricklayers, typographical workers, barbers, clerks, painters, cooks, and waiters...[along with the] decorative painters, and upholsterers."<sup>23</sup> He noted that there were also "quite a number of" independent locals, and a few railroad brotherhoods which he implied might later affiliate, along with requests from the National Association of Express Employees who also wanted representation in the Laredo CLU.<sup>24</sup> Much of this early work involved convincing and then guiding older, Spanish-speaking *mutualista* and other worker associations, in the process of chartering their organization with the AFL. For example, one of the unions he chartered in the Fall 1918, was a typographical union which had previously existed as an independent worker organization.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, he oversaw the amalgamation of two previously independent barber unions which united and affiliated with the AFL.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty with determining Clemente's organizing numbers comes from the ephemeral quality of these unions. Some did not remain with the AFL for long and reverted back to independence. This was the case for a group of railway workers he chartered in 1918, who left the AFL a mere seven months after joining.<sup>27</sup> In addition to reverting back to independence, another possibility for these organizations was to charter with the AFL, only to have that organization

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<sup>22</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 06 February 1919, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>23</sup> Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 188.

<sup>24</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 06 February 1919, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>25</sup> Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 188–89.

<sup>27</sup> On January 20, 1921, this same railway organization united with *La Sociedad Mutualista, Gremio de Carreteros* (Cart driver union) and nine months after that, the cart driver union merged with *La Sociedad Mutualista Obreros Unidos* to form *La Sociedad Mutualista, Conductores, y Obreros Unidos*, see *Ibid.*

maintain “dual associations.” *La Sociedad Porfirio Díaz, Mutua de Zapateros*, serves as a useful example. This union, according to *El Unionista*, “had not received the support of organized labor in the United States” which undoubtedly made them wary of the AFL’s commitment. Clemente helped them charter with the AFL as Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union No. 195 and through the union, they were able to win contracts with sixteen shops in San Antonio. However, the workers maintained both the AFL-chartered Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union No. 195 and the earlier, *La Sociedad Porfirio Díaz, Mutua de Zapateros*.<sup>28</sup> There are several reasons for this. In addition to being wary of AFL commitment, they were also accustomed to mutual-aid services such as death benefits in which, “Each member . . . contributed a dollar immediately after [the death of a brother] . . .to assist the widowed.”<sup>29</sup> The AFL helped families as well, but they required the union and the members be current on their dues before dispersing any funds from the central treasury.<sup>30</sup> In Secretary Morrison’s view, unions needed to “treat their benefit funds as a business proposition. They cannot be liable to sympathetic or sentimental demands but must be held strictly subject to the conditions imposed by laws.”<sup>31</sup> These benefits were simply too wrapped up in red tape, at too far a remove, and too business-like in the minds of many recently converted *mutualistas*. Despite the ephemeral quality to the unions Clemente was organizing, there did seem to be a high number.

We do not know how many workers were in each union, but clues are scattered throughout Clemente’s archive. A Bricklayers union he organized in Laredo had “26 brothers . . .struggling bitterly to get a morsel of bread;” on a different occasion he mailed a charter for a Farm Laborers

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<sup>28</sup> Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>30</sup> On the AFL’s approach to death benefits see, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 16 March 1928, Box 3 Folder, 12, CNIP.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Local in Central Texas with 13 members.<sup>32</sup> We can assume that the unions he organized typically ranged from 12-30 people each, although there is some evidence that suggests these numbers may have been even larger.<sup>33</sup> On December 18, 1918, Secretary Morrison wrote to Clemente: “Glad to hear that you will have nearly two thousand men organized before leaving for other localities.”<sup>34</sup> It is hard to say if these numbers were exaggerated. On one occasion Morrison appeared to ask for clarification writing, “I notice [from] your statement that after a short time you will be able to organize two or three new local unions. Do you mean in addition to the locals that were not organized before?”<sup>35</sup> Did Morrison perhaps think Clemente was inflating his numbers by claiming to organize “new” unions which had previously been organized? It is hard to say. But there are still other ways to measure his impact.

We can analyze how much he was given by the AFL for organizing expenses. From the chart below, we see that he often ranked in the upper tier of money expended within the list of paid organizers. The AFL reported on every dollar given to their salaried and temporary organizers and reported this amount in the minutes of their annual conventions. In 1919, Clemente received \$844.74 for organizing. Out of 112 organizers he ranked 53<sup>rd</sup> in the amount he earned. This was his first full year organizing and was the lowest amount he received during his career. In 1927, he was allotted \$6,634.44, while organizing in California and participating in immigration hearings in Washington D.C. This was the most he ever received, ranking 3<sup>rd</sup> out of 22 organizers that year.

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<sup>32</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 21 June 1921, Box 3 Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>33</sup> In a different letter Idar mentions having established 18 established in Laredo, See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Harry C. Bates, 18 February 1919, Box 1, Folder 1, CNIP.

<sup>34</sup> Idar organized the Laredo Central Labor Union in December of 1918 see, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 18 December 1918, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 29 October 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

Of the 13 years for which information on his spending exists and with the exception of 1926, Clemente was always in the upper half of money given organizers and ranked in the upper third every year save four (1924, 1926, 1928, 1929). Together, the reports to Morrison and the *American Federationist*, along with his spending activity portray a highly active organizer who was entrusted with a considerable amount of resources. Such work did not go unnoticed by the AFL's Executive Committee.

**Table 4.1**

<b>Clemente N. Idar "Organizing Expenses" 1919-1931</b>					
	Received by Idar	Sites of Activity	Idar's Rank	Total Organizers <sup>a</sup>	Total Spent
<b>1919</b>	844.74 <sup>b</sup>	Tex., Mex. (country)	53rd	112	165,609.56
<b>1920</b>	4,844.93	Tex, Ariz.	15th	125	285,584.45
<b>1921</b>	5,600.51	Tex., Ariz., Mex.	12th	105	279,605.66
<b>1922</b>	5,617.69	Tex., Mex., Okla., Mo., Kans.	7th	42	170,935.47
<b>1923</b>	8,063.24	Mex., Tex., N.M., Ariz.	7th	32	187,518.29
<b>1924</b>	5,212.73	Tex., La.	12th	29	131,168.08
<b>1925</b>	5,337.61	Tex., Ariz.	9th	31	132,305.88
<b>1926</b>	4,324.50	Tex., Ariz.	14th	23	105,151.92
<b>1927</b>	6,634.44	Tex., Calif., D.C.	3rd	22	114,778.76
<b>1928</b>	5,124.94	Tex.	10th	23	111,658.22
<b>1929</b>	6,007.09	Tex.	11th	30	125,357.26
<b>1930</b>	6,419.26	Tex., Colo.	4th	36	122,623.59
<b>1931</b>	5,820.84	Tex., Colo.	11th	41	139,526.91

<sup>a</sup> In 1919 the AFL only listed, by name, those who received over 49 dollars; in 1920-21, only those who received over 74 dollars, every year after, only those who received over 99 dollars.

<sup>b</sup> In 1919, Idar was also given an additional 1264.02 for Organizing Expenses related to the 1918 Laredo Conference

*Placing Organizer Idar's Work in Context*

From Clemente's reports to Secretary Morrison, one gets the sense that Idar seemed to push the boundaries of his work freedoms and allowances. For example, on January 6, 1920, he wrote Morrison stating that he intended to spend "one or two months" in El Paso because of the work needed to be done there. Morrison replied to the 36-year old Clemente, that "[T]he disposition of your time is regulated by instruction from this office...but it would appear to me that the recommendation you have made...is satisfactory."<sup>36</sup>

Later that year, on April 26, 1920, Morrison expressed frustration with Clemente when he asked if he could accompany the Journeymen Tailors' Union of America (JTUA) to Mexico City. Brother Thomas Sweeney, General Secretary of the JTUA, was traveling there for a labor congress and wanted to inquire about extending his craft's jurisdiction into Mexico. Although Sweeney believed that Clemente could help, Morrison was not happy with the breach in protocol for two reasons. First, since Clemente was an employee of the Federation, he needed permission to lend his services to one of the Internationals. Second, as Clemente was a printer and member of the Chauffer's Union, he did not belong to a Tailor's union and was thus breaking one of the cardinal rules of trade-union philosophy. Morrison wrote to Clemente, "This is the first information that I have had that you are a tailor and were capable of representing the Journeymen Tailors' Union of America."<sup>37</sup> Trade-union autonomy dictated that each craft was expected to elect representatives from among their own. Clemente was simply not following the rule. Sweeney had wanted Clemente to attend the conference in Mexico to help with translations. Morrison eventually relented writing, "relative to the desire of the [JTUA] for you to make a trip into Mexico...I might

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<sup>36</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 06 January 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>37</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 26 April 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

say that the information is satisfactory to the Federation.”<sup>38</sup> Morrison’s objections and the hedging language used in the response suggest Clemente was not acting like other “general organizers.”

Even Clemente’s title as “general organizer” came up for debate. In the same letter, Morrison asked Clemente why he was referring to himself as a “general organizer” when he was “merely employed as a non-commissioned translator for the organization.”<sup>39</sup> The archive demonstrates the incongruity of this remark. Since 1918, Clemente was addressed as “Mr. C. N. Idar, General Organizer” in correspondence from AFL leaders—even Morrison himself addressed him in this manner. Clemente noted these inconsistencies in his response, explaining that Morrison’s own correspondence was addressed to “C.N. Idar, General Organizer, American Federation of Labor.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, since April 17<sup>th</sup>, Clemente held a certificate of commission from the AFL, signed by Gompers. The archive does not contain a letter of apology so it is unclear if Morrison ever addressed the inconsistency.

Was this simply an oversight? Perhaps. But the archive contains a number of additional examples of “Organizer Idar” having issues with Secretary Morrison. In April 1919 he drew Morrison’s ire for not seeking prior authorization for expenditures, including paying Mauricio Canales \$13.50 to help him with organizing duties, and spending \$27.50 to hire a band for a laundry worker’s meeting in El Paso.<sup>41</sup> “The A.F. of L. does not pay expenses of this character,”

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Idar decided he had too much work in Texas to go to this conference. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 20 May 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>39</sup> Louise Diaz, “Hyphenated Citizen,” 82; Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 26 April 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP; Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 05 May 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Also, Idar’s archive contains numerous letters from Secretary Morrison referring to Idar as “Organizer” as early as November 26, 1918. See, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 26 November 1918, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>41</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 16 April 1919, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

Morrison wrote, adding, incurring of any expense outside of [hotel bills, railroad fare, telegrams] must be authorized by this office before they are arranged.” Clemente was reimbursed for both Canales and the band but Morrison made sure to remind him that “it is necessary for us to have a definite understanding relative to the expenses of organizers...Our means are limited, and...we cannot give the organizers *carte blanche* in the matter of incurring expenses, notwithstanding the fact that the extra expense is very helpful in the matter of promoting the success of work.”<sup>42</sup> Historian Stephanie Louise Diaz noted of Clemente Idar’s career, “[he] quickly realized...the *mutualista* organizing tactics he learned in his youth clashed with AFL policies and earned the anger of its secretary, Frank Morrison.”<sup>43</sup> This point is supported by another letter, four years later, in February 1923, where Morrison again complained of Clemente’s spending. “A very wide latitude has been given to you in regard to expenses, I think more than the English speaking organizers.”<sup>44</sup>

Such evidence is not provided here merely to uncover the tension between Morrison and Clemente, but also to demonstrate the difficulty of capturing Clemente’s work within the framework of “general organizer.” Even Morrison, his contemporary, had difficulty understanding why this regular organizer was being given such latitude. The fact that Morrison contrasted Clemente’s work with English-Speaking organizers provides a hint as to what was odd about Clemente’s activity. A careful examination of his archive suggests he was given latitude because

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<sup>42</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 02 May 1919, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>43</sup> Louise Diaz, “Hyphenated Citizen,” 76; It is possible that Diaz erred in writing that Idar had to cover the cost of Canales and the band himself as the above citation demonstrates, but the larger point—Morrison’s ire—still holds. See, *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 27 January 1923, Box 3, Folder 11, CNIP.

his particular skills intersected with international issues the AFL was focused on. Above all, he was given latitude because he was the AFL's Mexican specialist.

*The Mexican Specialist: Translator of Words and Culture*

Clemente carved out a niche within the AFL by positioning himself as a translator of words and cultures. As an interlocutor, his career was forever tied to mediating between various groups: Mexican labor leaders and U.S. labor leaders; Mexican workers and Anglo-American workers, Mexican labor leaders and Mexican workers in the U.S..

That he was able to do so owed as well to Samuel Gompers' clear interest in Mexico. Gompers worried about the IWW's influence in Mexico and how it might affect the U.S. labor movement, particularly in the border states of California, Texas, and Arizona. He worried about U.S.-Mexico relations, as there was always the threat of war looming during the period in which Idar worked for the AFL. And he worried about immigrants who he believed depressed wages, broke strikes, and lowered standards of living. Crucially, however, Gompers, along with the rest of the AFL brass did not speak Spanish.

Clemente immediately filled that void as he often translated for AFL officers during conventions with their Mexican counterparts. He, along with Santiago Iglesias, did so for the Laredo Conference of 1918, the third Pan-American Federation of Labor conference in Mexico City (1921), the Fourth Congress of the Pan-American Federation of Labor in Mexico City (1924), the CROM-AFL Immigration Conference in Washington D.C. (1925), and the Fifth Pan-American Federation of Labor Congress in Washington D.C. (1927) to name only a few.<sup>45</sup> Clemente was

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<sup>45</sup> "Pan-American Federation of Labor Organized by International Labor Conference in Laredo, Texas," *Pan-American Labor Press*, December 04, 1918, 1; *Report of the Proceedings of the Second Congress of the Pan-American Federation of Labor Held at New York City, New York July 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>, inclusive 1919* (Washington D.C., 1919).

part of a broader shift in the AFL's tactics geared towards addressing Mexico and Spanish-speaking workers' concerns. As explained in the previous chapter, Clemente had a way with words; he not only spoke Spanish—he did so with zeal. According to one contemporary, he “could sway the multitudes in English or Spanish,” while another, after seeing Idar speak to a group of workers noted, “considerable ovations from the laboring classes” adding that “daily committees [of workers] are waiting outside his hotel to see him.”<sup>46</sup> He deployed these oratorical talents when he spoke to crowds of Spanish-speaking workers and he used his knowledge of both languages to translate not only the words, but the sentiments, of the fiery speeches of AFL labor leaders.

Clemente also helped break the AFL's written language barrier. That the AFL had done very little organizing amongst Spanish-speaking people can be deduced from one of Clemente's main concerns: translating AFL organizational documents. He wrote Morrison on many occasions about the obstacles. This was “necessary printed matter” that was needed for “safe and efficient operation of our Spanish-speaking Unions,” Idar explained.<sup>47</sup> He lamented “not having translations prepared beforehand” because “[o]ur Spanish-speaking element needs quite a bit of education in the general principles of Unionism” and the inability to speak and write in English was “an impediment with which [he had] “to struggle all the way through.” He complained that, “translation and interpretation has multiplied my work enormously.”<sup>48</sup> Clemente believed that a

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<sup>46</sup> Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Clara Lomas, *The Rebel* (Houston, Tex: Arte Público Press, 1994), 175; Zamora, *World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 190.

<sup>47</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 25 November 1918, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>48</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 06 February 1919, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

good translation would “be a splendid guide for the organization” and could help “any number of labor unions in the South where we might have a preponderance of Spanish-speaking members”<sup>49</sup>

The work was tedious. He wrote to Morrison on March 18, 1922 that he spent five days, “in the task of drafting a local constitution, by-laws and trade rules for carpenters’ locals at Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.” At night he made the “customary readings and discussions” with the member of each local who made “a most exhaustive study of the laws and rules” submitted. He estimated that he would need another week to “translate 60 pages of Spanish matter” for those locals.<sup>50</sup> But for Idar, such tedious work was necessary and full of possibility. “I am deeply interested in seeing that my task of organization succeeds because others have failed and having nearly three million Mexicans in the South, the field for organization is vast and we can then more properly safeguard the interests of the organized labor movement in the United States.”<sup>51</sup>

The AFL had other organizers who spoke Spanish, such as John Murray, a U.S. born Anglo-American, Santiago Iglesias, a Puerto Rican Organizer, and Canuto A. Vargas, a Mexican national who worked in Arizona. But unlike those men, Clemente promoted his identity as a Mexican American to make the case for why he was uniquely qualified for this work. He based this claim on his biography and family ties, underscoring his father having founded one of Mexico’s earliest railroad unions. But he also emphasized the fact that he was born on the border and therefore possessed an intimate knowledge of both countries. Time and again, he noted his ability to speak to audiences on both sides of the border.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 18 March 1922, Box 3 Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>51</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 06 February 1919, Box 3 Folder 7, CNIP.

Sometimes he couched this self-promotion in terms of literal translation. When explaining to Morrison why the JTUA wanted him to attend the Mexico City meeting he reasoned, “I would be able to lend them efficient co-operation due to my knowledge of the English and Spanish language.”<sup>52</sup> Other times he translated the nuances of Mexican culture, as was the case when he offered Samuel Gompers counsel on the historic relationship between Mexico and the United States writing, “There has always existed in Mexico a lack of confidence, dislike and fear of unwarranted aggression...I believe, Mr. Gompers, most sincerely and *as a descendant of Mexicans*, that our [AFL] Federations did not spare...one single opportunity to defend Mexico’s territorial integrity and to defend Mexico against the machinations and aggressions of our interventionist element.”<sup>53</sup> This insider knowledge was sometimes couched in racialized language, exemplified on one occasion when he gave Gompers his view on a meeting they both attended: “I recalled the private conversation held between you and [Luis N.] Morones in Mexico City and *using my Mexican Indian instinct*, I believe Morones did not fence this time and I feel strongly inclined to believe that he used your sledge hammer.”<sup>54</sup> These moments of “translation” were frequent within Clemente’s communications. He always made sure to present himself as someone who could translate not only words, but also Mexican culture, making him invaluable to organizers in the Southwest.

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<sup>52</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 05 May 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>53</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 11 December 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP [emphasis added].

<sup>54</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 05 April 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP [emphasis added].

*AFL's Requests for Organizer Idar*

Clemente played a key role organizing the 1918 Laredo Conference—a meeting between the American Federation of Labor and Mexico's Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana.<sup>55</sup> The meeting was held on November 13, 1918 and Clemente coordinated lodging and transportation for the delegates and translated speeches.<sup>56</sup> This work placed him in a position to hear and understand every resolution introduced along with the arguments and compromises reached between the delegates, both publicly and privately. The work also introduced him to many of the AFL's most important leaders. Soon after the conference, requests for Idar's services became frequent. In 1918, he was asked to go to San Antonio, Eagle Pass, and El Paso all cities with thousands of ununionized Mexican workers, to help stimulate unionizing activity.<sup>57</sup> In 1919, El Paso's Central Labor Union asked whether Idar could work in that city for a month to six weeks.<sup>58</sup> In 1920, Henry T. Dehart, Secretary of the San Antonio Building Trades Council, requested him because there was "much to do" and Organizer Idar "[was] the proper man to do it." Morrison responded to one request writing, "there are a great number of calls for Organizer Idar in Texas and we are doing the very best we can to assist the various localities."<sup>59</sup>

The following year, 1921, only increased the number of calls for Organizer Idar. That year, President Gompers assigned Clemente to help the Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen in the Fort Worth, Dallas, Oklahoma City area, later sending him to help the Postal Clerks of Texas with an

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<sup>55</sup> *Pan-American Labor Press*, December 4, 1918, 4.

<sup>56</sup> On Idar translating see "Samuel Gompers en Laredo," November 12, 1918 *Evolución*, 2. In a letter to Morones, Idar mentions the trouble he went through getting delegates to Laredo. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Luis N. Morones, 31 March 1920, Box 1 Folder 24, CNIP.

<sup>57</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 11 November 1925, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>58</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 31 December 1919, Box 3, Folder 7, CNIP.

<sup>59</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Henry T. Dehart, 28 September 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

organizing campaign across the state. Clemente was also asked to lend a hand to the Building Trades Council in Tucson which wanted him to assist with re-organizing in that city. This on top of an appeal from Luis N. Morones, who wanted Clemente in Mexico City for three to four days to confer with the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers so that they could discuss combining the organizations with their counterparts in Canada, the United States, and Mexico.<sup>60</sup> Clemente wrote to Morrison, “[o]utside of all the work that my above statement covers I have many more calls that I never tell you anything about because I just simply realize that we can not [sic] go to all those places at one time.”<sup>61</sup> Clemente was not the only person to notice all the work needing to be done with so little time. Secretary Morrison wrote to Idar explaining, “We have been receiving quite a number of communications from different points asking for your assistance” adding that he should only fulfill these requests if he could “do so without interfering too materially with the work that you are carrying on at the present time.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite the warning, Clemente continued to spread himself thin. In the year 1921 alone, he attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pan American Federation of labor Conference in Mexico City (January 10th-18th) in which he “personally arranged, interpreted and attended all the conferences [concerning craft to craft agreements] with the exception of the one in which Bro. Iglesias of Porto Rico interpreted for Bro. Frye”<sup>63</sup>; he helped the Amalgamated Meat cutters and Butchers of America (AMBA) prepare for strike negotiations; he translated the constitution of the United Brotherhood of

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<sup>60</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 23 April 1921, Box 3 Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 15 February 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP. Correspondence from John F. Hart to Frank Morrison, 21 March 1921, Box 3, Folder 1, CNIP.

<sup>63</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Daniel J. Tobin, 12 February 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

Carpenters and Joiners of America's Spanish-speaking local #2020 from English to Spanish; and even delivered a Labor Day speech for the AMBA in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>64</sup> Requests like these continued throughout his career for the AFL.<sup>65</sup>

Often, requests for Organizer Idar came with a note about the need for a Spanish-speaking organizer. He was told at one point to go to Argentine, Kansas because "I have been told that I can organize quite a number of Mexican workers." Similarly, William Green (President of AFL, 1924-1952) received a letter from Joseph V. Moreschi, President of the International Hod Carriers, Building and Common Laborers' Union (1926-1968), who wrote asking for:

someone for a few days to assist [a Mexican, Spanish-speaking local] in straightening out different matters who could speak the Mexican language... [and there are] very few Mexicans in our organization and not having anyone who can... [speak] the Mexican language who is versed in our labor problems, and being aware that Organizer Idar of the American Federation of Labor is well versed in the Mexican language, being of Spanish or Mexican descent, I would greatly appreciate it if you would be kind enough to spare Organizer Idar for a few days.<sup>66</sup>

Such requests also came from President Gompers who called on Clemente numerous times. In addition to the requests noted above, Gompers entrusted Clemente with arranging meetings between AFL and CROM officials. For example, in January 1920, he charged Clemente with

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<sup>64</sup> Correspondence from Malone to Clemente Idar, 06 June 1921, Box 3, Folder 1, CNIP; Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 25 July 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP; Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Ed Garrenton, 20 August 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>65</sup> For a sampling of requests see, Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 07 December 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP; Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, [Organize in Mexico], 24 April 1922 Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP; Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 10 July 1923, Box 3, Folder 11, CNIP; Correspondence from William Green to Clemente Idar [out of state], 23 April 1925, Box 3, Folder 11, CNIP; Correspondence from William Green to Clemente Idar, 13 May 1930, Box 3, Folder 13, CNIP; Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 19 November 1932, [also, just before his death] Box 3, Folder 14, CNIP; Correspondence from William Green to Clemente Idar, 21 July 1933, Box 3, Folder 14, CNIP.

<sup>66</sup> Correspondence from Joseph V. Moreschi, 12 December 1928, Box 3, Folder 12, CNIP.

organizing a conference for the International Association of Machinists in Mexico City to be held on January 11, 1920. Clemente escorted the Dominican delegation from Laredo to Mexico City. When the group arrived, they were feted by members of CROM and Clemente spent the night at the St. Francis Hotel.<sup>67</sup>

He maintained this relationship by keeping his ear to the ground in order to keep Gompers and the AFL abreast of Mexican politics, in particular Mexican immigration. For example, in August 1920, he reported to the AFL Executive Committee—via Canuto Vargas—that an open-shop drive had commenced in the Texas-Arizona region which came on the heels of a change in immigration policy by the Labor Department towards the importation of Mexican labor (including contract labor).<sup>68</sup> In July 1920, he even spoke with incoming Mexican president General Álvaro Obregón about the future President's views towards organized labor.<sup>69</sup> In communications with Clemente, Gompers even hinted at the fact that Idar was one of his most trusted organizers. When Idar inquired about creating official ties between the AFL Machinists and those associated with CROM, Gompers responded by writing, “One thing I may express to you now, is that there is no man in whose ability and credibility I have greater confidence that [sic?] I have in you.” Following this phrase, he added, “and yet I must have the information, for I too must give an account of any course I pursue.”<sup>70</sup> Such language cannot be used to judge the entirety of their relationship, yet

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>68</sup> In 1885, a contract labor provision was added to United States Immigration law which banned hiring foreign workers prior to their emigration to the U.S. See, Mark Resiler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1949*, (Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut, 1976), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 24 July 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>70</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 11 January 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

when understood alongside the various requests and assignments with which Clemente was involved, we may safely assume that he had earned Gompers' trust.

### *Conclusion*

In the final analysis, the title of “general organizer” does not fully capture the work Idar did for the AFL. In one respect, Idar was doing the work that any organizer for the AFL was expected to do—working with strikers affiliated with the AFL, establishing and promoting AFL labeled products, and organizing workers into local, international, and other AFL affiliated unions. Because he was focusing on Mexican workers he was asked to do much more. As the only Mexican American organizer working for the AFL, he had to cover more ground translating documents, ideas, speeches and on occasion, “culture.” He was even compelled to participate in higher-level planning and strategy. And from the examples above, we can also see that he leveraged such work into carving out new roles and responsibilities those formally assigned him. It is clear that Organizer Idar did much more than just organizing, as became apparent during the El Paso Railway Shopmen's Strike of 1922 to which we will now turn.

## **Chapter 5: Crossing the Border, Crossing the Picket Line: Transborder Solidarity and the El Paso Railroad Strike of 1922**

*It is extremely gratifying to me to know that your work has been so effective and that it meets so fully with the commendation of the striking shopmen to whom you have given such faithful service.*

-Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar<sup>1</sup>

*The full history of the strike...will never be written unless due and proper credit is given to Bro. Idar.*

-J.W. Kelley, Organizer for International Association of Machinists<sup>2</sup>

### *Introduction*

On September 4, 1922, Clemente Idar addressed a crowd of workers gathered in Cleveland Square during El Paso's largest Labor Day parade to date. He spoke to the crowd about the national railroad strike, ongoing since July 1<sup>st</sup> and launched by 400,000 railway shopmen across the country. Two thousand eight hundred of these strikers worked in El Paso. Idar was assigned to help the local shopmen win their battle against the U.S. railroad interests. The workers and community members gathered in Cleveland Square were not just from the United States. Over three hundred of them crossed the Rio Grande River from their homes in northern Mexico, accompanied by a municipal band, to march in solidarity with El Paso's strikers. Idar must have taken pride seeing the binational crowd because it was in large part his work that helped create this transborder demonstration of solidarity.

Clemente Idar spoke to the crowd about the railroad owners whom he accused of only wanting to lower wages and roll-back union rights. He referred to them as "organized capital," which he imagined as an alliance among growers, manufacturers, corporate owners, civic business organizations, and citizen associations such as the Citizens' Industrial Association of America

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 28 September 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, Clemente N. Idar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin (cited herein as CNIP).

<sup>2</sup> J.W. Kelley to Samuel Gompers, Sept., 1922, and Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, May 17, 1923, in Letterbooks, 1919-1924 as seen in Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 194.

(CIAA), and the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>3</sup> Idar charged organized capital with investing large sums of money in Mexico to keep wages low and to extend their influence abroad. “[T]he American Federation of Labor [was] keeping step” resisting such actions by allying with “labor bodies in all countries.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than helping bust unions, Idar predicted that organized capital’s tactics would soon backfire and all “railroad workmen in Mexico” would be “thoroughly organized as a direct result of the shopmen’s strike in the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Idar considered the strike a battle between organized labor and capital, which could only be won by building transborder labor solidarity with Mexican laborers.

Idar was in El Paso during the parade on a three-month assignment (July-October 1922) on orders from AFL president, Samuel Gompers. Idar focused on securing alliances with Mexican labor leaders and working to prevent strike breakers from crossing both the border and the picket line. Frank H. Balt, president of El Paso’s Central Labor Union (CLU), organized the strike, but Idar quickly made himself indispensable by mobilizing his network of labor allies in Mexico. For El Paso’s strikers this support was absolutely crucial as railroad labor recruiters often turned to Mexicans to replace the workers on the picket line. For Idar, crossing the border to take work in the railway shops was in effect crossing the picket line; he worked tirelessly to stop the Mexican workers from migrating north.<sup>6</sup> He mailed letters and wired telegraphs daily to keep Mexican union allies apprised of the status of the strike. He mailed out bulletins and Spanish-language

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<sup>3</sup> For an early essay on the term “organized capital,” see, Harry P. Robinson, “Organized Labor and Organized Capital” *Journal of Political Economy* 7, no. 3 (1899): 327-51.

<sup>4</sup> “Strikers Ask Public Support in Labor Day Demonstration; Crowds at Speaking and Parade,” *El Paso Daily Herald*, 04 September, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 07 September 1922, Box 3 Folder 10, CNIP.

communiques, addressed public gatherings as often as he could, and raised funds for the cause. He became a fixture within the executive strike board meetings, at one point, acting as a Chair of the Strike Executive Board in El Paso, all to win the strike.<sup>7</sup> Idar's grander goal was to unionize Mexican workers to prevent immigrants from accepting low wages and thus exploited by U.S. capitalists. His work in El Paso demonstrated what transborder solidarity between unions in Mexico and the United States could theoretically produce.

The chapter begins with Idar's previous union organizing between 1918 and 1922 to highlight the relationships he forged with Mexican labor leaders and politicians. It then turns to the 1922 Railway Shopmen's Strike to explain how these alliances were deployed and their efficacy tested. Lastly I turn to why the overall strike failed, arguing that the transborder solidarity was short-lived. This international union solidarity demonstrates that the relationship between unions and immigrants was not always antagonistic and not solely based on preventing immigrants from crossing the border. In fact, Idar's powerful argument was that Mexican immigrants should cross the border to build working class solidarity as unionized workers, not to enhance the profits of railroad corporations.

#### *Building Transborder Alliances, 1918-1920*

Clemente Idar began tapping into a broad network of transborder Mexican-U.S. allies when he began his working as a general organizer for the AFL in 1918. He had previously forged relationships with Mexican political leaders first working as a journalist, as an active member of mutual-aid and Freemason associations, and as a small-time player in border politics. He met and interviewed Mexican diplomats stationed in Laredo's consular office and Mexican politicians

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<sup>7</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 05 August 1922, Box 3 Folder 10, CNIP.

headed to the United States. His young brother, Aquilino Idar, in a 1984 interview about his family's history, confided that "[s]omehow or other we've always been close to the presidents of Mexico."<sup>8</sup> Aquilino spoke of his older sister Jovita's work with Venustiano Carranza during the Mexican Revolution, of his brother Clemente's relationship with Presidents Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, and of his brother Federico's association with President Lázaro Cárdenas. The Idar family had friendship relations with many of Mexico's important political leaders. Clemente Idar drew on these old relations to fashion new ones through his AFL job. There, he was introduced to a different facet of Mexican society: the world of organized labor.

Clemente Idar was thrust into this world at the 1918 Laredo Conference, where he met Mexico's labor leaders and was introduced to the putative power of transborder alliances.<sup>9</sup> For example, during the conference planning stages, Idar learned that Mexico City's lino-typists were requesting a twenty percent wage raise.<sup>10</sup> The newspaper owners refused prompting a lino-typist strike. The owners threatened to import strike breakers from the United States, Cuba, and Guatemala.<sup>11</sup> Idar aided these strikers by connecting them with members of San Antonio, Texas's Spanish-speaking, lino-typist union, requesting that they not accept "invitations to work in

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Aquilino I. and Guadalupe Idar, 1984, interviewed by Jerry Poyo and Tom Shelton, October, 26, 1984, Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Collection, OHT 331.8 I18, University of Texas at San Antonio.

<https://digital.utsa.edu/digital/collection/p15125coll4/id/1304/> (herein cited Aquilino Idar Interview).

<sup>9</sup> The 1918 Laredo Conference was the inaugural meeting of the Pan American Federation of Labor. The history of this conference is explored in chapter five of this dissertation.

<sup>10</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to José F. Gutiérrez, 02 November 1918, Box 1 Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid; The strikers sent, Filiberto G. Reza, a printing press union leader, to the U.S. with the intention to ask lino-typists not to accept work in Mexico City during the strike. Reza was stopped from crossing the border at Laredo for not having a passport leaving Idar to transmit the information. See, Ibid.

Mexico” during the strike, making it clear that crossing the border to scab in Mexico, meant crossing the union’s picket line. The outcome of this strike remains uncertain since it did not leave a strong imprint in the historical record. But exchanges between the two unions demonstrate the embryonic emergence of a transborder labor network and Clemente Idar’s efforts towards the development of transborder union solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

From August 1918 to July 1920, Idar’s AFL duties were focused on establishing unions, developing relations with top Mexican labor leaders, and honing his rhetoric about the benefits of transborder solidarity. But generating it proved difficult here because union activity was scarce. From 1876-1911, President Porfirio Díaz controlled Mexico by building an interlocking web of competing alliances all loyal to him. Díaz had no tolerance for labor unions and kept them at bay throughout his dictatorship by creating a capitalist economy with few worker rights and favorable to foreign investments.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars argue that despite Díaz, the emergence of union activity helped chip away at his coalition and helped catalyze the Revolution that ended his regime. Idar began organizing in Mexico as its labor movement was small but growing, just as for different reasons the U.S. Southwest was notorious for its lack of union activity. The U.S. Southwest was dominated by an agricultural economy dependent on low-wage seasonal Mexican migrants, making it difficult to sustain a labor movement. In addition, anti-union forces had a ready-supply of strike breakers due to the region’s proximity to the Mexican border. Organizing unions in the Southwest was a formidable challenge, one Clemente Idar energetically rose to meet.<sup>14</sup> He quickly

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Carr, *El movimiento obrero y la política en México, 1910-1929*, (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> For an example of using anti-union sentiment to campaign for political office in Texas, see Lewis L. Gould, *Progressives and Prohibitionists: Texas Democrats in the Wilson Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 270-271; Making similar points about organizing the difficulty

learned that organizing just one side of the border was a Sisyphean task; for every union member recruited, one or more un-unionized worker entered the U.S. It was therefore only logical to approach his work on both sides of the border.

Idar began promoting his transborder unionization ideals with letters to U.S. and Mexican labor leaders. He wrote to Luis N. Morones, General Secretary of CROM, to encouraging him to work with the AFL, pointedly proposing, “[w]hy not have a few public government positions for some comrades in all the ports along the [Rio] Bravo.”<sup>15</sup> With such union organizers in place they could “reach a practical agreement regarding the exchange of union cards between the two movements.”<sup>16</sup> At the 1918 Laredo Conference, Morones and his Mexican delegation, met with AFL delegates and proposed creating a system whereby the credentials of Mexican union cardholders would get recognized in the United States. Idar knew this proposal would grab Morones’ attention, believed in its merits, and certain that their transborder recognition would “produce a happy, sound and practical understanding [between U.S. and Mexican labor unions]”<sup>17</sup>

Clemente Idar made significant progress towards securing internationally recognized union cards, creating an agreement of solidarity between the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA) and the *Carpinteros y Similares de México* (Union of Carpenters and Kindred Trades of Mexico) in the border cities of Eagle Pass, Texas and Piedras Negras, Coahuila. This was “pioneering work,” Idar admitted that had never been attempted. It would “ameliorate

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organizing in Texas but for a later period, see John Weber, *From South to Texas to the Nation: The Exploration of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2015), 161-162.

<sup>15</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Luis N. Morones, 03 March 1920, Box 1 Folder 24, CNIP.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 22 December 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

the open shop conditions under which several thousands of Mexican carpenters find themselves in.”<sup>18</sup> Such formal agreements held the promise of unionizing thousands of Mexicans, immigrants, and carpenters. His work soon bore fruit. Several UBCJA unions were formed in Mexico. Establishing unions was only half the battle. Maintaining them required structural support they did not yet possess. The UBCJA unions do not appear to have lasted, but Idar’s goal to create transborder solidarity did.

Idar shifted his tactics slightly to promote transborder unions to Achille P. Persion, Secretary-Treasurer of the International Hod Carriers’, and Building, and Common Laborers’ Union of America, presenting it as a way to limit the impact of Mexican scabs during strikes. Idar wrote Persion asserting that uncontrolled immigration was a “menace” to the “economic conditions of the organized wage-earners of the land.”<sup>19</sup> He framed immigration limits as a matter of economics, pointing out that the average Mexican’s low wage in the United States was still much higher than that in Mexico. But Idar did not suggest stopping immigration, only that “we must bring about a uniform state of affairs between the aliens who come to work in our country and our citizens.”<sup>20</sup> The first step towards this goal was establishing labor bureaus and placing organizers along the border; what he had proposed to Morones two weeks earlier. Pitching this idea to Persion was strategic because the Hod Carriers’ Union was the “back-bone of the building trades” and the most logical union to recruit Mexican common laborers. Idar suggested that there

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Achille Persion, 17 March 1920, Box 2 Folder 3, CNIP.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

were perhaps two million un-organized Mexicans laborers and eleven million Black workers, who could potentially become dues paying union members.<sup>21</sup>

There were two reasons for Mexicans and Black workers to become strikebreakers. First, since AFL unions had not attempted to organize Mexicans and Black people, they logically had no loyalty to the trade unions. It was the failure to unionize these men that left them vulnerable to the overtures of the “open-shoppers.” “[T]he Mexicans of Texas have shown a great willingness to become organized wherever we have made an appeal to them and just as much, can I say in reference to the Negroes,” Idar explained<sup>22</sup> Second, he referenced a letter from the Secretary of the PAFL informing that of the 25,000 Mexicans who were taken from the southern states to help crush the strike, none of them knew they were strikebreakers. They were unaware of this fact largely because of poor unionizing efforts, which could be improved by creating transnational labor bureaus and securing labor cooperation across the border. Ideally, such efforts would help spread strike information, build loyalty to trade union causes, and swell union numbers.

By 1920, Idar was at work establishing cooperation between U.S. and Mexican officials and articulating the benefits of transborder solidarity with Morones and Persion. During the 1922 Railway Strike he launched transborder propaganda campaigns to inform Mexican workers of the union’s struggle, and broadly publicized the unscrupulous labor tactics that were being used to break the strike. Prior to 1922, Idar faced skeptical trade union leaders and years of indifference towards the unionization of Mexican immigrants in the United States. Nevertheless, he was laying

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<sup>21</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Achille Persion, 17 March 1920, Box 2 Folder 3, CNIP.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

the groundwork for U.S.-Mexican labor cooperation and painting a picture of what genuine interest in Mexican unionization would yield.

*“The Open Shop” Movement in Arizona and Texas, 1920-1921*

Organized capital was a formidable challenge to Idar’s vision of transborder solidarity. Organized capital united around the managerial principle of the “open-shop,” an “open” regulatory system on the shop floor, where employers were free to hire, fire, and promote employees at their discretion and employees were free to work regardless of their union-status. “Closed shops,” by contrast were work sites that required union membership as a condition of employment; its opponents claiming that they were a danger to individual rights. As historian Chad Pearson argues, “they frequently presented themselves as committed to ‘doing right’ by protecting the ‘common people’ in the name of community, harmony, patriotism, and industrial peace [yet] employers were primarily interested in earning profits and maintaining unfettered managerial control.”<sup>23</sup> Open-shop advocates wanted unencumbered managerial control to maximize profit.

The “open shop” movement was formidable. By World War I, 1,665 employers and business associations supported and enforced it.<sup>24</sup> One of these associations, the Citizens’ Industrial Association of St. Louis, counted 8,500 open-shop members.<sup>25</sup> This movement not only sought alliances with other employers and businessmen, it also courted politicians, judges, newspaper owners, and prominent thinkers in order to shape public opinion and stymie collective bargaining legislation.

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<sup>23</sup> Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America’s Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Idar learned how formidable the open-shop movement was during an organizing trip to Arizona in June 1920, when the Arizona State Federation of Labor (ASFL) asked for organizing aid in Phoenix amongst the ethnic Mexican community. The ASFL was in the midst of a re-organizing campaign challenged by local business elites who launched an “open-shop” drive supported by farmers, local Chambers of Commerce, and the copper and cotton interests of the state. This conglomeration was highly invested in keeping laborers unorganized. These interests had spearheaded the Salt River Irrigation Project to make cotton farming in the Salt River Valley profitable. Toward this end, the federal government built the Roosevelt Dam and by 1920, Pima cotton was being harvested lucratively on 200,000 acres. Historian Eric V. Meeks notes, “[c]orporate interests and speculators dominated farming in the Salt River valley from the beginning, building a modern infrastructure that linked the area to the world market and demanding an increasing number of manual workers.”<sup>26</sup> Organized capital not only found it important to attract laborers, but also to control them by keeping wages low, regulating their movement, and discouraging union membership.<sup>27</sup> It was during this trip that Idar understood that the manner in which transborder solidarity might be used was to combat organized capital.

Idar arrived in Arizona on July 11, 1920 and immediately began traveling around the state to encourage Mexican workers to join unions and foster a sense of transborder solidarity with local union labor leaders. He took this message to Phoenix and beyond, stopping in Tucson, Mesa, Tempe, Chandler and the small-towns in the Salt River Valley.<sup>28</sup> In these locales he addressed

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<sup>26</sup> Eric V. Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Luis F. B. Plascencia and Gloria Cuádras, eds., *Mexican Workers and the Making of Arizona* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018), see especially Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>28</sup> Idar met with Leroy Kenedy, of the ASFL, Lester B. Doane (general organizer), and George Simmons of the Phoenix Central Labor Union, along with officers from related unions in

union and non-union members, mostly of the “Spanish-speaking element.” In Tucson, 2,000 union members, along with their women and children gathered in an open-air meeting to hear Idar and his group. The event ended with a parade. Days later he met with Pedro Ojeda and General E.G. González, the former and then current Mexican consular diplomats stationed in the region.<sup>29</sup> From conversations with these labor leaders, Mexican government representatives, and workers Idar quickly ascertained labor conditions in Arizona, which resembled those in Texas.

ASFL members “Brothers R.M. Sánchez and Ed. M. Flores,” told him of the abuses Mexican farm laborers were enduring; “long hours of work, low wages and ill treatment.” Sánchez and Flores reported “instances where the farmers [took] the law into their own hands to deport imported laborers.” These instances of vigilante law were how the state’s growers behaved. Backed by police, farmers jailed and often deported workers who asked for higher wages and better working conditions. In Glendale Arizona, six Mexican farm laborers were jailed and deported after asking the Arizona Cotton Growers Association for a wage increase. One of the deportees was forced to leave behind his eight-year old child.<sup>30</sup> Sánchez, as secretary of the Phoenix Federal Labor Union complained of farmer maltreatment was subjected and soon faced retaliation. In the Spring of 1920, he was arrested for supposedly avoiding Selective Service registration and was held in a Nogales jail for the entirety of “picking season.” He was eventually released without explanation.<sup>31</sup> Such examples illustrated both the need for a transborder alliance and its obstacles.

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Phoenix. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 24 July 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Eric V. Meeks, *Border Citizens*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Idar worried about the treatment of Mexican workers from the vantage point of a U.S. organizer. He was not alone. The Mexican government monitored, as best it could, the treatment of its citizens both for humanitarian and diplomatic reasons. Sociologist David FitzGerald maintains that both the exit of Mexican citizens to the United States and their treatment was a principal concern for Mexican presidents during most of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> As early as 1904, Mexican leaders at the federal and state levels tried to ban emigration by refusing to issue travel visas. Article 123 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution mandated that “county authorities...ensure that migrating workers left with signed contracts detailing wages and hours and including the provision that employers cover repatriation costs.”<sup>33</sup> Yet like all nations in North America, the Mexican government never fully gained control of its borders. The Revolution and competing interests between state and federal officials prevented a long term well-funded strategy to protect migrants. Instead, Mexican officials provided Mexican migrants aid when possible.

Such sporadic help was too small to ensure the safety of all Mexicans residing in the United States. However, Idar found that the Mexican government could become a union ally during moments of limited conflict. While in Arizona Clemente Idar learned that two ASFL members, Sánchez and Flores brought evidence of farmer maltreatment across the border to the Governor of Sonora, who relayed them to Mexican Interim President Adolfo de la Huerta. President de la Huerta ordered all “Consuls of Mexico in the state of Arizona...to safe-guard the welfare of Mexican laborers by all possible means.” President de la Huerta ordered the “temporary cessation of immigration from Mexico into the United States,” producing a decrease in

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<sup>32</sup> David FitzGerald, *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

immigration and “lightly increased” wages.<sup>34</sup> Idar reported that, “there is no doubt that the industrial, agricultural and general business interests of the state are puzzled by the shortage of farm laborers.”<sup>35</sup> From this intervention Idar learned that the Mexican government could be called on to address immigration issues to protect the well-being of its citizens. Idar continued to cultivate relationships with Mexican labor leaders and politicians who might support his larger plan to incorporate Mexican workers into U.S. unions while preventing un-unionized Mexican immigrants from being exploited. The trick was to secure the right allies.

Clemente Idar found such an ally when he met General Álvaro Obregón in Nogales, Sonora in 1920. Idar’s report to the AFL Secretary Morrison noted that the General “is quite generally expected to become the next constitutional president of Mexico...knowing Obregon is a friend of the laboring masses...we felt that we should call to pay our respects [to] discuss the border labor problem.”<sup>36</sup> Obregón responded via Idar: “[I] welcome a delegation of Mexican and American labor representatives with who I wish to discuss any and all labor problems that may be brought to my attention...one of the first acts of my government must be to help the laboring masses of my country.”<sup>37</sup> Idar must have impressed AFL leadership by meeting with officials like Obregón, slated as the future President of Mexico. Additionally, Idar saw how his position enabled him to mediate between U.S. and Mexican labor and political leaders.

Idar left Arizona, returning to Texas on July 20, committed to giving transborder solidarity associational form. There he met with El Paso’s Mexican Consul General, Luis Montes de Oca, to discuss, as encouraged by Obregón, “all suggestions that we might make in reference to the

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<sup>34</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 24 July 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

importation of Mexican labor into the United States.”<sup>38</sup> Idar learned that the Mexican government had already formed a study committee on Mexican labor, already an acute problem due to the 1920 U.S. recession and the dire straits of fired Mexican farmworkers with no way to get home. Newspapers in Fort Worth, Denver, and Houston reported increasing numbers of unemployed Mexicans in Texas’ major cities seeking relief. As a result, Montes de Oca received authorization from the *Departamento de Gobernación* to pay return railroad fares for any Mexican laborer in Ciudad Juárez seeking admission into the United States. These were small, but tangible results stemming from labor cooperation.

Montes de Oca and Idar also discussed several ideas on how to “improve the welfare of Mexican laborers” in the U.S.. Although this event is murky, Idar suggests that he played a role in formulating an agreement that would be used to protect Mexican workers, which subsequently established “Protective Agency for Mexican Labor” (*Agencia Protectora del Trabajador Mexicano*), which was originally Idar’s brainchild.<sup>39</sup> Montes de Oca also wanted to establish labor bureaus at all border towns to inform Mexican immigrants of their basic rights and to instruct them to secure written agreements with their employers touching on length of the workday, worker treatment, and wages. He wanted all “labor crossing into the United States [to] bear passports and contracts approved by the Mexican Government.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, he aimed to station Mexican representatives at all important border towns, with one representative for every 25 Mexican laborers, which in 1920 meant hiring over 4,000 government employees. This larger network of border stations was never fully built, perhaps owing to instability in Mexican politics and its

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

prohibitive cost. One demonstration Protective Agency was established in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which served as an example of what transborder solidarity could produce.<sup>41</sup> Idar conjectured that this first agency would eliminate “entirely the old practice [sic] of speculating” with the importation of low-wage laborers. “It is only a matter of time [when] the Mexican government will have control of such matters in a way less detrimental to the welfare of the laborers of their own country and ours as well.”

By 1921, Idar had worked three years as an AFL organizer, had enough experience, and organizing successes to express optimism about the promise of U.S.-Mexico labor solidarity. He expressed this optimism in a letter to Frank Morrison:

Time is just simply ripe for the A.F. of L. to effect [sic] some understanding with the Labor Movement and the Government of Mexico so that the immigration of Mexican laborers may be regulated. This is one weapon that the open shoppers use against us all over the country and heretofore, we have never realized how severely that current of immigration has been striking against us every year. Our friendly and very cordial relations with the Government of Mexico should be appealed to so that we might regulate that kind of immigration. The Mexican Labor Movement and the Mexican Government will both lend us their co-operation.<sup>42</sup>

Clemente Idar continued to promote his ideas in 1922, writing to B.M. Jewell, the President of the AFL’s Railroad Department: “I have frequently wondered if the standard railroad organizations of the Republic of Mexico patterned very much after the system of our American railroad organizations, could be of material and substantial assistance in a crisis of the nature mentioned above.”<sup>43</sup> Idar could not have known of the upcoming railroad strike, yet recent events

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<sup>41</sup> Graziella Altamirano, *Chihuahua: una historia compartida, 1824-1921*, ed. Guadalupe Villa, Colección Historia General de Chihuahua (México, D.F.: Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, 1988) 309, 403.

<sup>42</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 23 April 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>43</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to J.M. Jewell, 28 January 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

had primed him for it. The expressions of solidarity at the 1918 Laredo Conference, the cooperation demonstrated between U.S. and Mexican lino-typists, the interest in transnational border unity amongst carpenters' unions, and the promises of solidarity among Mexican political and labor leaders made him believe transborder solidarity was possible. Drawing on his recent experience he asked Jewell:

Is their [sic] anything truly interesting and important in the idea of bring[sic] all the railroad organizations of the United States and Mexico together upon some common ground of mutual understanding, even if it was only to establish friendly relations at the outset and later on form a pact of solidarity [so]... brotherhoods of both of the countries ... would be able to act harmoniously in times of trial and crisis.<sup>44</sup>

Idar ended this letter ready to make it happen.<sup>45</sup> On the eve of the 1922 Railway Strike, his vision of border solidarity did not seem so farfetched.

#### *Origins of the 1922 Railway Strike*

Samuel Gompers dispatched Idar to El Paso on July 2, 1922, one day after railroad shopmen stopped work across the U.S. to protest a nation-wide wage reduction, initiating the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike. The strike comprised 400,000 workers making it the biggest labor action since the 1894 Pullman Strike. It began with labor actions aimed at post-World War I capitalist retrenchment purportedly justified by the country's economic slowdown. In 1919 alone,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Later that year, in April of 1922, Idar, and all other general organizers for the AFL, were placed on furlough for one month due to the deteriorating economic conditions caused by the Depression of 1920-1921. During that time, Idar worked with Brother Hutcheson of the UBCJA to create pacts of solidarity amongst the carpenter unions of both countries. Idar noted he had requests from workers in Monterey, Nuevo Leon and Torreon, Coahuila to come and speak about the same ideas. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 18 March 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP; Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 27 March 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

“4 million workers participated in more than 3,500 strikes.”<sup>46</sup> As the world’s first “Great War” came to an end, a new war had begun between organized capital and labor. Workers across the country were dissatisfied. Idar landed on the front lines of this conflict leading El Paso’s shopmen against the railroad bosses in the region.

The strike was a significant threat to the country because rail transport had become an essential service and industry. By the beginning of World War I, the U.S.’ agricultural hinterlands in the South and Southwest were connected to the manufacturing centers in the Midwest and Northeast via 360,000 miles of track, guiding 2,500,000 freight cars, 55,000 passenger cars, and 66,000 locomotives; an industry that grossed four billion dollars in 1917.<sup>47</sup>

In 1920, 2,236,000 railroad workers helped load, maintain, and drive the trains that moved goods and people across the nation. Of the 2.2 million plus railroad workers, 400,000 were railroad shopmen, the class of worker Idar was sent to El Paso to recruit. Shopmen were responsible for construction, repair, and maintenance of the “rolling stock,” the passenger and freight cars, and the locomotives, which included machinists, boilermakers, blacksmiths, electricians, sheet-metal workers, and railway carmen. These workers maintained the rolling stock’s engines, built, dismantled, repaired and painted the car’s metal and wooden structures, forged the steel for components and tools, electrified the cars and shops, and machined steel tires, pistons, and valves all in addition to the general maintenance of each car’s structure. The general labor was described succinctly in the following poem:

So we keep the locomotives  
Coming in and going out,

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<sup>46</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph Anthony McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Colin J. Davis, *Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen’s Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 10-11.

All repaired for good, hard service,  
Every part made firm and stout.  
So the shop is very busy,  
There's noise and racket all about.<sup>48</sup>

On July 1, 1922, the “noise and racket” of railway shops stopped to protest the nationwide wage decrease approved by the Railroad Labor Board (RLB), the nation’s railway regulatory commission. The moment the strike commenced, railroad owners began their attack, not only to bust the strike with scabs, but also to create “open shops” in an industry they deemed had leaned too far in the opposite direction during the war.

*Railroad Workers during World War I*

Beginning in 1914, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson prioritized war time readiness, ordering industrial stability in steel, agriculture, and railroads. As a result, railroad unions made impressive gains between 1914 and 1916. Many of these gains were won by the AFL’s Railway Employees’ Department (RED), established in 1909 to unite individual railroad crafts into a nationwide organization composed of system federations.<sup>49</sup> Four years later, the RED, along with other unions bodies, was boosted when Woodrow Wilson appointed William B. Wilson (no relation), a former mine-worker, as the Secretary of Labor. By appointing Secretary Wilson to his cabinet, historian Joseph A. McCartin maintains, Wilson “openly embraced labor as a constituency of his administration and his party.”<sup>50</sup> Railroad employee unions had the RED, a union-tolerant

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>49</sup> Historian Collin J. Davis referred to these system federations as “quasi-industrial” because even though individual craft autonomy was maintained, the federation took on the veneer of an industry-wide union (industrial unionism).

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Anthony McCartin, *Labor’s Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 15.

president, and a former unionist as Secretary of Labor just prior to the war.<sup>51</sup> With the U.S.' entry into World War I, unions gained a key addition to their growing strength: leverage.

Workers, particularly railroad workers, realized that the demand for labor was greater than the supply, giving them leverage during strikes. Labor Secretary Wilson's office was inundated with dispute resolutions as both management and labor turned for aid there. And while the bigger rail lines -- the Pennsylvania, Santa Fe, and Southern Pacific (the latter served El Paso), remained recalcitrant to union demands, all this changed on December 26, 1917, when the U.S. government took control of the railroad industry.<sup>52</sup> Union workers were now government employees, with more power to press their wage demands.

Wilson nationalized the railroads because they had come to a transport standstill. Railroad companies, to maximum their profits created logger jams on tracks blocked by cars waiting for sufficient cargo to make profitable trips. Additionally, the war created a railroad labor shortage as its workers left for higher wages in the steel mills and munitions factories. In the South, Black workers migrated North for higher wages and the hope of finding less-racist places to live. Thus the U.S. government took control of the railroad industry and putting it back in motion.

Railroad workers had a host of demands from the U.S. government. After authorizing government management of the railroad industry, President Wilson established the Railroad

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<sup>51</sup> Conspicuously absent from the list of shopmen allies was the four most important railroad brotherhoods known as the "Big Four."<sup>51</sup> The Big Four consisted of the "operating" Railroad Brotherhoods, the unions comprised of workers who operated the moving train. These were the 1) Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), 2) Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, 3) Order of Railway Conductors, and 4) Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. Since the late nineteenth century, the Big Four resisted a formal alliance with the AFL as they were able to make gains separate from the trade-union federation because of their importance to the industry.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 34-36.

Administration to oversee it and to address labor concerns.<sup>53</sup> The gains were immediate. In 1918, railroad workers attained standardized wage levels for all shopmen at an increased rate of sixty-eight cents an hour, recognition of an eight-hour day, time-and-a-half payment for overtime, seniority wage and promotion rules, and codified disciplinary procedures.<sup>54</sup>

At the war's end, the AFL's RED moved to secure their wartime gains through a national agreement that would compel railroad management to recognize all shopcraft unions, including continued government control of the railroad industry.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, the railroad workers wanted wages tied to standard of living increases. Two years after the war, railroads were still under government tutelage; and after a year of deliberation and a short-lived, unplanned strike, the RED on September 20, 1920, won .04 cents an hour increase (to .72/hour), standardized work rules, and recognition as a bargaining agent. As one union leader cheered, "We accomplished more...in three years of government control than we did in twenty-five years of private control."<sup>56</sup>

In response railroad operators moved to weaken unions by establishing open shops, intimidating their workers, abolishing the national boards of adjustment, and dividing their

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<sup>53</sup> During the war, Wilson created a robust bureaucratic apparatus to address labor complaints. Upon assumption of the railroad industry, Wilson created the Railroad Administration (RA) headed by William G. McAdoo. On February 21, 1918, McAdoo issued General Order no. 8 banning discrimination of railroad union members. McAdoo also established a Railroad Wage Commission to analyze wages and working conditions. In April, he applied the recommendations of the commission via General Order no. 27. Showing their wartime leverage, shopmen protested the wage increase for not being high enough. In response, McAdoo formed the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions (BRWWC) and the Railway Board of Adjustment no. 2 (May 1918) to analyze proper wage scales, wage complaints, and later disciplinary and personal grievance policies. Davis, *Power at Odds*, 37-38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> The RED put their money into backing Glenn E. Plumb's campaign to continue government control of the railroad industry—the Plumb Plan. When surveyed on what they thought, 306,720 out of 308, 186 (99.5 percent) of shopmen were in favor of government control of the railroads. Davis, *Power at Odds*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

workers anew by location and craft, cutting wages, and redefining company work rules. This retrenchment was helped along in 1920 when Republicans won control of the U.S. Senate (49 Republican to 47 Democrats) and Republican Warren Harding was elected as president that November. Harding's campaign slogan promised a "return to normalcy," a slogan that pledged an end to that strife caused by the 1919 Strike Wave, inflation, and communist fears. Politicians began to bait their enemies, portraying them as "reds" to discredit their opponent's, as soon became a common practice amongst railroad representatives. As one railroad representative bullied, "I am just calling your attention to the fact that RED spells red."<sup>57</sup>

Congress passed the Transportation Act on February 23, 1920, which returned control of railroads to their owners, providing them with a percentage of the profits the government had accrued. The act also established the Railroad Labor Board (RLB) which, at first, seemed like a concession to labor. Labor, management, and the public each had three representatives on the board, charged with resolving conflicts between labor and capital in non-partisan ways. RLB had no legally binding power that eventually favored railroad owners, for as one union leader poetically summarized in 1923: "The Labor Board is clearly not a two-edged sword which cuts impartially in either direction. It has a blunt edge when used against the employers. Its blows have no force; but when this sword is turned against the employees it is sharp and deep."<sup>58</sup>

This observation became truth in 1921 when in June, railroad representatives went before the RLB again to decrease wages; labor protested. The RLB sided with employers approving an average 12.5 percent wage decrease.<sup>59</sup> In July 1921, the Pennsylvania Railroad went before the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>58</sup> H. D. Wolf, *The Railroad Labor Board* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), 373.

<sup>59</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 54.

RLB over the still pending union recognition of System Federation no. 90, ruling that a new election was needed. The Pennsylvania Railroad ignored the ruling altogether, because the RLB enjoyed no enforceable powers. The Board continued its pro-business decisions dismantling overtime rules, prohibitions on piecework, and approving wage reductions for an entire year. Finally, on July 1, 1922 the RLB approved a seven-cent reduction in railway shopmen's hourly wage and in response, they went on strike.

### *Idar Joins the Strike*

Idar arrived to El Paso on July 2, 1922 and wasted no time, participating in strike committee meetings and disseminating information to community members at public gatherings, all with "very little expense to the Federation."<sup>60</sup> He raised funds for the Striker's Finance Committee, appealing to union friendly businesses and union members across the city and across the border in Mexico. Brother José W. Kelly even claimed that Idar raised \$87,000 in one month from 33,000 Mexican Railway organizers who each contributed 5 pesos.<sup>61</sup> He reached out to "different labor organizations and officials of the Federal government in Mexico" to coordinate cooperation between the labor movements of both countries. And adept in the use of propaganda, Idar constantly drafted and distributed "bulletins [and] printed matter in the Spanish language" to inform the Mexican and Mexican American communities of striker grievances.

Idar's initial report to Gompers outlined what he had accomplished in his first three-months, noting his assessment of what was required for the railroad strike in El Paso to succeed. Only by preventing the entry of Mexican strikebreakers would it triumph, and to do that U.S.-

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> J.W. Kelly, *To All Organized Labor* (Houston, Texas, The American Friends of the Republic of Mexico, 19 September, 1922) in Box 7, Folder 1, CNIP.

Mexican labor solidarity had to be more profoundly animated. El Paso was “a very important geographical point” where he and other labor organizers were mobilizing to resist “imported strike-breakers.”<sup>62</sup> Idar continued in his report to Gompers, “If I did not do anything else but work against the importation of labor, that in itself would be quite a contribution of the American Federation of Labor to the success of the strike.”<sup>63</sup>

*Preventing Strikebreakers in El Paso*

El Paso was an important geographical point, maintains historian Mario T. García “[o]wing to its geographic and border location, El Paso became ... a significant railroad, smelting, ranching, and commercial center with both national and international importance in that it linked the southwestern region with the rest of the United States as well as with Mexico.”<sup>64</sup> It was the “main terminal for Mexican immigrants” and a “regional marketplace of cheap labor.”<sup>65</sup> El Paso had the second largest Mexican population in the United States (after San Antonio) by 1920 and had more Mexicans than Americans residing there.<sup>66</sup> The 1914 Dillingham Commission noted this city’s dependence on Mexican labor, estimating that “17.1 percent of all common laborers employed in the maintenance of way departments of nine western and southwestern railroads.” Most Mexicans were employed on the Southern Pacific, which represented some thirty-seven percent of all railroad workers in the city. While white workers were the dominant groups

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<sup>62</sup>Albert, ed., *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, 120-121.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Mario T García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 36.

strikebreaking across the country, because of El Paso's workforce demographics, Mexican workers tended to be both strikers and strikebreakers.<sup>67</sup>

In 1922 the Southern Pacific's conductors, engineers, firemen, and brakemen refused to strike and could thus run trains, but lacked the worker to maintain and fix them. To address this absence, companies sought strikebreakers from different parts of the country, including from Mexico. Idar believed that the success of the strike in El Paso rested on the strikers' ability to enlist the support of the Mexican community to prevent the importation of Mexican strikebreakers. For this he turned to the Mexican labor movement and government officials.

How many strikebreakers were stopped from crossing the border is hard to establish. We know from evidentiary traces of its success from Idar's correspondence between CROM and AFL officials. In early July 1922, Idar informed Luis N. Morones, head of CROM, about the strike and the potential problems Mexican strikebreakers posed. Morones telegraphed Idar on July 15, informing that CROM's central committee was made aware of Idar's suggestions and that they were making "arrangements necessary according to your requests and in line with the principles of worker solidarity."<sup>68</sup> The specifics were not included, but clearly made their way to Plutarco Elías Calles, the head of the Secretariat of Government, because Idar later informed Gompers of the "great cooperation" strikers were receiving from Calles, who had "ordered a train load of strikebreakers who were about to cross the Rio Grande at Laredo returned to their homes, in view of the fact that he was apprised that the men were going to work at the Denison, Texas railroad shop."

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<sup>67</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 121-122.

<sup>68</sup> Correspondence from Luis N. Morones to Clemente N. Idar, 15 July 1922, Box 1, Folder 24, CNIP.

Driving home the point of how cooperative the Mexican government was being, Idar noted, “[q]uite a difference in the attitude of Calles and that of our government.”<sup>69</sup>

The AFL’s Executive committee routinely forwarded information concerning Mexican strikebreakers to Idar. One such letter from George B. McDaniel, Secretary Treasurer of the Fort Worth Railway Shopcrafts, reported that Sam Kessler, a labor recruiter was transporting 250 Mexicans from south Texas to El Paso weekly as strikebreakers.<sup>70</sup> Their precise origin was unclear wrote McDaniel; perhaps Kessler was “getting them smuggled across the border, or picking them up in south Texas [sic].”<sup>71</sup> McDaniel worried because companies had imported Mexican workers during the previous year’s strike in 1921, but abandoned them at the strike’s conclusion, leaving them to finance their own way home.<sup>72</sup> Idar quickly wrote Morones in Mexico City conveying information he had from a number of telegrams from throughout the United States concerning the “continued threat of *Braceros y Artesanos*” (workers and artisans, skilled and unskilled) coming into the region.<sup>73</sup> He urged that Calles find some solution that might curtail the large numbers of workers coming into the territory, “at least for the duration of the strike.”<sup>74</sup> Manuel J. Tellez, Charge d’Affaires of the Mexican Embassy (*Encargado de Negocios de la Embajada Mexicana*) in Washington D.C. soon learned of all of this and instructed consuls to “redouble the efforts taken until today to avoid the immigration of workers from Mexico at least during the period of the

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<sup>69</sup> Albert, ed., *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, 120-121.

<sup>70</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 04 August 1922, Box 3 Folder 10, CNIP; Correspondence Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 11 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>71</sup> Correspondence from McDaniel to Frank Morrison, 04 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>72</sup> Correspondence from Frank Morrison to Clemente Idar, 11 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>73</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Luis N. Morones, 17 August 1922, Box 1, Folder 24, CNIP.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

railroad strike... it will be in the best interest of both parties”<sup>75</sup> CROM and Mexican officials could not prevent the employ of all strikebreakers but could take strategic action to provide labor unions with a powerful ally.

Another forwarded letter reached Idar’s desk in mid-July; the letter was addressed to Frank H. Balt, the head of the shopmen’s striking committee in El Paso. Balt had received word from union workers in Sanderson, Texas that a Boiler Inspector was “fraudfully” importing Mexican strikebreakers. These workers criticized the recruitment of strikebreakers and their work conditions because it was “impossible for [these] men to leave service [immediately] because they were menaced by the boiler Inspector and ...forced...to work.” They urged Balt to “publish a part of what this letter said and also a part of what this [sic] men will tell you so that the rest of people know some things of what railroads are doing during the strike.”<sup>76</sup> Balt also telegrammed Carrillo Vargas in Mexico City requesting train passes for Juan Peters and six “firm Mexican Strikers,” probably union-friendly strikers to shore up picket lines.<sup>77</sup> Idar and Balt encouraged unionized workers to cross the border to hold the picket line.

The Sanderson workers wanted to publicize the tactics labor recruiter used and did so in a circular addressed to the “Workers of Mexico,” appealing to their honor, their safety, their solidarity with unionized Mexican and U.S. workers in the United States.<sup>78</sup> Written on July 14, 1922 it implored Mexican workers not to “stain their character” by intervening in this industrial

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<sup>75</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Manuel J. Telles [sic], 25 August 1922, Box 2, Folder 6, CNIP.

<sup>76</sup> Correspondence from Mr. Razen to Frank H. Balt, 05 July 1922, Box 2, Folder 3, CNIP.

<sup>77</sup> Correspondence from A. Carillo Vargas to Frank H. Balt, 11 July 1922, Box 1, Folder 1, CNIP.

<sup>78</sup> Clemente N. Idar, Frank H. Balt, Jesús Arellano, Felix Avendano, Guillermo G. Reynoso, “A Los Trabajadores Mexicanos” El Paso, Texas, 14 July 1922, Box 4, Folder 2, CNIP.

conflict by “400,000 perfectly united men [which] should be left to the nationals in this country.”<sup>79</sup>

The circular described the labor recruiters as “slave traffickers,” who “hooked” Mexican workers into dangerous tasks. It asked Mexican workers to consider the bonds of nationality they shared with the 1,800 strikers in El Paso. One-thousand of them were Mexican citizens who through their wages supported “4,000 men, women, and children.”

Enrique D. Ruiz, Mexican Consular in San Antonio, Texas, added his own warning about the behavior of “*enganchadores*”:

I have been informed that some of these companies serve as *enganchadores* which hook workers by making them believe the work was permanent, exposing them to all manner of setbacks, since they send them far into the United States without a guarantee that they will be reimbursed the ride back home if they are fired...It’s very far from my intention to impede workers who obtain work as “strike breakers” all I want, is to provide a plain understanding of the consequences of obtaining that work [and] the false promises that can cause serious disturbances in the future.<sup>80</sup>

Clemente Idar’s focus on Mexican strikebreaking reveals the transborder network of labor allies he had cultivated and relied on during this period. From his correspondence we see how information flowed through the network, preventing the arrival of trainloads of Mexican strikebreakers at one point, stopping a labor recruiter at another, revealing his view that only the “right” type of immigrant should be allowed to enter into the United States. Whereas policymakers were concerned about an immigrant’s national origin, literacy, and propensity to become a public charge, Idar simply believed the right type of immigrant was one with a union card.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> The letter was signed, San Antonio, Texas, July 6, 1922 Consul General of Mexico, Enrique D. Ruiz, Ibid.

*Private and Public Displays of Solidarity in Mexico*

Idar strengthened solidarity between Mexican labor unions and the AFL through private and public recognitions of their shared activities. For example, after his initial report to Gompers in July, he encouraged the AFL President to glowingly acknowledge that cooperation by Mexico's labor movement and its labor-friendly politicians. "I respectfully request you to please bear the above information in mind as a time may come when you... will have an opportunity to express, officially, your appreciation."<sup>81</sup> Gompers acknowledging receipt of the letter "with interest" replied that he had sent Idar's letter to Mr. B.M. Jewell, President of the AFL's RED,<sup>82</sup> which eventually made its way to Mexico's major labor leaders.<sup>83</sup> On August 10<sup>th</sup>, CROM's Central Committee wrote Gompers acknowledging the "warm opinions you hold for our organization." Mexican workers recognized the "indissoluble lakes of solidarity uniting [Mexican workers] with laborers on the

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<sup>81</sup> Peter J. Albert and Grace Palladino, eds., *The Samuel Gompers Papers: The Last Years 1922-24*, vol. 12 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 120-121.

<sup>82</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 01 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>83</sup> On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, Idar sent A. Carrillo Vargas a message, purportedly from Gompers, in Spanish, transcribed by Idar, expressing thanks to the organized workers of Mexico for the "wonderful spirit of solidarity displayed towards the striking railway workers in this country" making sure to thank in particular the union of "*Mecánicos Mexicana de la Confederación de Sociedades Ferrocarrileras de la República Mexicana*." The latter encouraged Mexican workers to abstain from crossing the border for employment during the strike. It is unclear if this specific letter was sent, but on August 8<sup>th</sup>, Canuto A. Vargas (no relation to Carrillo) wrote Idar providing copies of letters sent by Gompers, in Spanish with similar expression of gratitude as those transcribed by Idar. Those letters were sent to Pedro Soto Moreno, General Secretary of the *Confederación de Sociedades Ferrocarrileras* in Chihuahua, Mexico and Baltazar Ruiz, General Secretary of the *Unión de Mecánicos Mexicana*, Aguascalientes, Mexico. See, Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 01 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP; Correspondence from A. Carrillo Vargas to Samuel Gompers, 02 August 1922, Box 2, Folder 8, CNIP; Canuto A. Vargas forwarded Idar letter sent to Pedro Soto Moreno and Baltazar Ruiz, see Correspondence from Canuto A. Vargas to Clemente Idar, 08 August 1922, Box 2, Folder 5, CNIP.

other side of the [Río] Bravo.<sup>84</sup> These expressions of respect and appreciation strengthened ties of solidarity between the Mexican and American labor movements.

This solidarity was also demonstrated by newspapers across Mexico which began reporting on August 1, 1922 that some 45,000 railway shop workers across the country planned to stop work for two hours as “an act of support toward the striking railroad workers in [the United States].”<sup>85</sup> The next day railway shopmen and sympathetic unionists marched down Reforma Avenue towards the U.S. Embassy, to send a message to President Harding: “intercede, so that the railroad strike in the neighboring republic is solved soon.”<sup>86</sup> Guadalajara’s manifestation featured stronger critiques of U.S. capitalism, with one protestor holding a posters which read: “Sooner than allowing U.S. plutocracy to produce two corpses [U.S. and Mexican labor], we prefer to fall in the battle defending liberty and justice.”<sup>87</sup> The workers marched in solidarity with the U.S. strikers yet through their posters, they also directed their ire at “the U.S. capitalists...[and] heads of the railroad trusts.”<sup>88</sup> Similar acts of solidarity took place in ethnic Mexican communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. *El Tucsonense*, Tucson’s Spanish-language newspaper reported that more than 2,000 people participated in a demonstration in Ciudad Juárez (across from El Paso) expressing “sympathy with the workers of all the railroad shops which are on strike in the United States.” As

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<sup>84</sup> Correspondence from Comité Central [de CROM] to Samuel Gompers, 10 August 1922, Box 3, Folder 6, CNIP.

<sup>85</sup> “La huelga ferrocarrilera en EE. UU. amenaza con un paro general que afectará mucho a nuestro país,” *El Informador* (Guadalajara), August 1, 1922, 1.

<sup>86</sup> “Ordenadamente se efectuó en todo el país la manifestación de los ferrocarrileros,” *El Informador* (Guadalajara), August 2, 1922, 1.

<sup>87</sup> “Reino el más completo orden en la manifestación efectuada en Guadalajara,” *El Informador* (Guadalajara), August 2, 1922, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

in Guadalajara, the signs they carried read, “Welcome U.S. Railroad Workers;” “Comrades in Strike, will win;” and “Ideally, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso Have No Borders.”<sup>89</sup>

#### *El Paso Labor Day Parade, 1922*

Early on the morning of September 4, 1922, three-hundred and fifty Mexican workers convened at the intersection of Comercio and Juárez Avenue, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua planning to cross the border into El Paso, Texas. More than twenty-five of them were denied entry because they had never emigrated and lacked proper identification cards. Three-hundred plus marchers crossed, accompanied by a Mexican band who were greeted on Santa Fe Street to cheers by “hundreds of El Paso Mexicans.” In the Mexican delegation were union men such as Castello Herrera, president of the Juárez Central Labor Union and Salvador Llanos of the Ciudad Juárez railway brotherhood. Others Mexican union members, along with Mexican railroad workers, freight handlers, coachmen, and express wagon drivers, joined the seven thousand American laborers in what was then “El Paso’s biggest Labor day parade.”



Figure 5.1 1922 El Paso Shopmen’s Strike<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> “Más de 2,000 personas formaron una manifestación en honor de los huelguistas en Ciudad Juárez” August, 05, 1922, *El Tucsonense*, pg. 15.

<sup>90</sup> [Unidentified Image] Box 10, Folder 7, CNIP. This image is almost certainly from the 1922 Railway Strike. The *El Paso Herald* reported that on labor day “300 strong crossed the

Thousands of El Paso residents gathered on the sidewalks to watch the parade. There were many familiar faces in the crowd such as El Paso Mayor Charles Davis, city councilmen W.T. Griffith, and L.J. Trotti, along with union members from the fire and police departments. The onlookers also saw the full spectrum of El Paso's workforce. There were: brick layers, steam and operating engineers, bridge and iron workers, pile drivers, sign and pictorial painters, decorators, paper hangers, plasterers, electrical workers, automobile mechanics, letter carriers, post office clerks, cooks, waiters, theatrical and stage employees, and motion picture operators. Carpenters and joiners stood out because of their garb, wearing their typical blue shirts and white overalls. Barbers paraded in decorative trucks decked out "with wheels decorated like barber polls." The crowds were also treated to the music blaring from a "Magnavox" that the Electrical Workers' union had rigged to their truck. Ensembles such as the "union labor band," and the "8<sup>th</sup> Calvary band from Fort Bliss" also offered musical entertainment. Mexican national were ubiquitous amongst the marchers. The Mexican brass band was reported to have been a crowd favorite. They were "repeatedly cheered" as they played familiar "Mexican marches" such as the "Zacatecas." Others held banners with messages in English and Spanish: "Unión y fuerza," "Union Labor Knows no National Boundary Lines."<sup>91</sup>

Many of the Mexican participants in the parade were also active in the strike. The Mexican shopmen "engaged in strategic picket duty on the U.S.-Mexican border" where they reportedly

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international bridge headed by a brass band and cheered by hundreds of El Paso Mexicans...Among the unions represented was the 'Mutual union of small merchants.'" The banner for this union can be seen in the bottom left of this image. See, "Strikers Ask Support in Labor Day Talks," *El Paso Herald*, September 04, 1922, 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. For the last sign see article, "Mexican Union Men Parade in Streets of El Paso," September 05, 1922, *Dallas Morning News*, pg. 16.

stopped sixteen hundred workers from entering the United States to labor on the railroads.<sup>92</sup> Mexicans were noticeably present enough in strike activity for one Anglo-American machinists to alert a military intelligence informant that, “Americans were willing to do the leading in the walk-out, but that they were shirking their duty on the picket line by leaving the responsibility altogether to the Mexicans, whom the strike leaders should be wary about trusting...Mexicans [were holding] together and that they will remain loyal to the union.”<sup>93</sup> The distrust of Mexicans reported in this statement exemplified the difficulty cross-class, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial organizing posed. Antagonism between Anglos and Mexicans along the Texas-Mexican border was at a high. Nevertheless, the fact that the two groups were working together is evidence that cooperation and trust could be forged.<sup>94</sup>

Credit was given to Clemente Idar for these public displays. Canuto A. Vargas maintained that “Brother Idar has been the point of contact between the Mexican Railway Trades Federation and the striking shopcrafts, and it is to his activities, to a very large extent, that the manifestations of support and solidarity of the Mexican labor movement with the strikers is due.”<sup>95</sup> Idar was indeed due this credit, but more importantly understood the power of transborder union organizing and coordination. The Mexican delegation’s participation in the labor parade provided a glimpse into Idar’s forward looking vision, in which union workers were bound together in transborder solidarity.

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<sup>92</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 70.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> For an analysis of interracial union organizing see, Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>95</sup> Correspondence from Canuto A. Vargas to Samuel Gompers, 07 September 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

As the parade ended in Cleveland Square a crowd gathered to hear speeches. When it was Idar's turn, he chose to speak on the Daugherty Injunction.

*The Daugherty Injunction*

Railroad company executives directed an all-out attack to break the shopmen's strike, which had begun on July 1, refusing to rescind wage decreases, abolishing piece-rate work, ending "contracting-out," establishing standardized overtime and disciplinary rules, supporting adjustment boards, and retaining the seniority rights of striking workers. They imported workers from various points in the U.S. and Mexico often paying their train fares, setting up temporary housing, and using state authorities (Marshals, coast guard, military) to ensure the strikebreaker's safety. But despite these actions, trains were running inefficiently and dangerously from July to September.<sup>96</sup> Complaints from railroad operation workers flooded in about unsafe tracks, which were only getting worse despite some repairs. Operations employees even threatened to walk-off the job because of the unsafe conditions.<sup>97</sup> President Harding intervened late in July and attempted mediation, sending his representatives to meet with the RED executive council, railroad executives, and the bankers who financed the railroad. By the July meeting's end, the RED executives were willing to end the strike as long as the seniority rights of the striking shopmen were retained, but without addressing "wages, piecework, contracting-out, and a national adjustment board."<sup>98</sup> Bankers and railroad executives refused to yield on seniority rights. In early August, Harding asked the shopcrafts to drop seniority rights demand. The request was anathema to workers who valued their hard-earned privileges in work that offered little room for

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<sup>96</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 111-112.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

advancement. That was rejected on August 12. Daniel Willard of the B&O Railroad, representing 52 lines, attempted to settle the strike by negotiating each regional line separately, but shopmen demanded a national agreement. It became a drawn-out strike.

By late August, trains were deteriorating, people, goods, especially coal, were not being transported efficiently. The RLB remained powerless. Congressional Republicans were pressuring Harding to settle the strike before November elections.<sup>99</sup> On August 26<sup>th</sup> Harding took a three-day cruise on the *Mayflower*, the presidential yacht, with Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall, Senators Albert B. Cummins and Frank B. Kellogg, and Attorney General Harry Daugherty. Daugherty was as anti-labor as they come and came aboard the *Mayflower* to propose a federal injunction against the strike.<sup>100</sup> Daugherty was fully ready to act if Harding agreed to his plan. Harding agreed. When Daugherty disembarked, he headed to Chicago to present the plan to Judge Wilkerson. “Citing incidences of violence and the interruption of U.S. mail services and interstate commerce, Daugherty called for an order that would prevent the encouragement of the strike by the strikers’ leadership.”<sup>101</sup> Wilkerson agreed and “handed down one of the most sweeping federal injunctions in U.S. history.”<sup>102</sup>

The injunction was far reaching and harsh. Strikers were not allowed to hinder or obstruct railway laborers in their work, or to show “displays of force” such as gathering in groups and making intimidating threats or jeers. Others pushed the lines of injunction norms banning “loitering” and “congregating” near the railroad shops or “engaging, directing or encouraging

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>102</sup> Ruling was based on the argument that strikers were engaging in conspiracy, intimidation, and “interference with interstate commerce.” See, Ibid.

others to engage in the practice commonly known as picketing.”<sup>103</sup> Some stipulations bordered on the authoritarian, prohibiting union leaders from encouraging workers to strike “in any manner by letters, printed or other circulars, telegrams, telephones, word of mouth, oral persuasion, or suggestions...using, causing, or consenting to the use of any of the funds or monies of said labor organization in aid of or to promote or encourage the strike.”<sup>104</sup> In essence, the railway shopmen’s ability to protest was outlawed.

Clemente Idar spoke at Cleveland Square just days after the injunction and he took direct aim at the Attorney General.<sup>105</sup> “Daugherty’s injunction says we must not speak [but] I invoke the inalienable right to speak and I am speaking.” He assured the striking workers that their cause was righteous. “I would consider it the greatest honor that could be bestowed upon me to be put in the sweet El Paso county jail...I would take along with me mayor Charles Davis, councilman W.T. Griffith and P.E. Gardner, candidate for mayor,” who stood beside him at the march. Next he focused on the “red-baiting” (“RED is Red”) union members and leaders were lampooned as un-American and as Bolsheviks. “[T]he public must remember [the strikers] are devoted citizens of this country and 100 percent Americans...Don’t call us Bolsheviks or radicals. The Bolsheviks and radicals are in Wall street [sic?]. They were responsible for the election of Harding and the appointment of Daugherty.” Railroad corporations and their political allies were the real enemies, not the strikers.

Here one sees the complicated matrix in which the strike occurred. World War I spurred union activity and gave laborers leverage that they turned into material gains, all in the name of

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Strikers Ask Public Support in Labor Day Demonstration; Crowds at Speaking and Parade,” *El Paso Daily Herald*, 04 September, 1922, 1-2.

patriotism as domestic warriors for the United States. What followed was a sharp decline in tolerance for leftist ideologies (communist, anarcho-syndicalist, and socialist) with a capitalist backlash against increased union power. How Clemente presented union demands mattered greatly. He, like many labor leaders, tried to speak about “unions” in a patriotic tone, as “100 percent American” not “Bolshevik.” Wall Street bankers and their injunctions were the real threat to working people in the United States; they the real radical Bolsheviks. In this tug of war, the power of the state triumphed.

The effect of the on the Railway Shopmen’s Strike was significant, yet difficult to evaluate directly. In his assessment of Daugherty injunction’s impact on the strike, historian Colin Davis concludes that some arrests were for injunction infractions, but it prevented other unions from staging strikes for fear of arrests and the financial costs of fighting federal injunctions at precisely the moment when funds were needed to combat striking worker fatigue. Given these two constraints, individual railroad shops began to negotiate deals with management to end their strikes.

Shortly after their original federal injunction, RED representatives met with representative of the Seaboard Airline, Baltimore and Ohio, and New York Central Railroad companies, who were authorized to bargain for forty-nine other lines. They agreed to recognized the seniority rights of the striking shopmen, hoping that their agreement would serve as a good-faith example for the rest of the country.<sup>106</sup>

September 1922 proved tense for Idar and Balt tried to hold picket lines while reports of settlements came in from various points. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, Idar received a wire asking for

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<sup>106</sup> Dubofsky and McCartin, *Labor in America*, 204.

information on the Texas Pacific Line and warning that injunctions had been ordered in New Orleans and Chicago.<sup>107</sup> William H. Johnston, general President of the International Association of Machinists, then wrote Idar: “settlements have been reached on a number of roads” and were close in Chicago, New York, Baltimore, and a number of other cities.<sup>108</sup> Johnston explained he and his colleagues were trying to attain the “greatest results possible,” negotiating with the roads “holding key financial positions” first, so that “other roads [could be] brought to a conciliatory attitude.” Idar’s job, according to Johnston, was to “leave nothing undone to properly present this angle to the men in that section of the country.”<sup>109</sup> On September 29 workers on the Western Pacific and Northwestern Pacific returned to work. Idar told El Paso’s newspaper reporters that strikers here were holding firm but understood that the RED was “making strong efforts for settlement.”<sup>110</sup> Despite his steadfast posture in the press, it was clear Idar believed the end of the strike was near.

Strike morale had declined in El Paso. Idar wrote his wife Laura on October 3rd, explaining that “[o]ne of the officers of the strikers helped very much to break the strike here.”<sup>111</sup> Idar’s letter was in reference to William A. McCarthy, who he accused in the *El Paso Herald*, with shattering the morale of striking shopmen in El Paso and spurring desertions by giving a “pessimistic speech at Liberty Hall on the future of the strike.”<sup>112</sup> McCarthy was a general chairman of the sheet metal workers on the Southern Pacific system and member of the national policy committee. “We did

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<sup>107</sup> Correspondence from [Illegible author name] to Clemente N. Idar, 22 September 1922, Box 2, Folder 6, CNIP.

<sup>108</sup> Correspondence from William H. Johnston to Clemente Idar, 25 September 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> “Strikers Hanging On,” September 29, 1922, *Big Spring Herald*, pg. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Laura Idar, 03 October 1922, Box 1, Folder 18, CNIP.

<sup>112</sup> “Strikers Say Leader Helped Break Morale,” October 06, 1922, *El Paso Herald*, 7.

not bring any charges in the executive session against Mr. McCarthy...[But] formal charges may be filed after Mr. King has conducted a further investigation,” Idar was quoted in a newspaper. Idar later wrote Gompers explaining that McCarthy made a “tearful, pessimistic and treacherous report concerning the deliberations of the last conference held in Chicago by railway employees’ department.”<sup>113</sup> McCarthy retorted, “I simply explained to the shopmen what had occurred at Chicago.”<sup>114</sup> Charles Whitecomb, representative of the Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers, asked Idar to do “everything in your power to continue the spirit of the Southern Pacific men at El Paso, until my arrival.”<sup>115</sup> Idar and Balt continued to solicit funds to keep the strike going to maximize their settlement leverage, which was fizzling as workers read about settlements across the country. Idar ended his letter to wife Laura: “I am only waiting for the situation to get to a point when I may be able to return home...Tell the babies in the next few weeks Papa will return.”<sup>116</sup>

In early October 1922, Idar left El Paso. In his letter to Gompers, “I did not consider my life safe at El Paso...[p]ersonal matters and the strike made it difficult for me to remain there.”<sup>117</sup> Laura and his three children had fallen ill and he was ready to return home. He entrusted his strike duties to B.F. King and J.W. Kelly closing his letter with “I would rather perform my duty anywhere else except El Paso.”<sup>118</sup> A month later, the El Paso strike ended. Gompers protested that it was “less of an agreement, and more of the company dictating upon what terms it will utilize the

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<sup>113</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 16 October 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>114</sup> “Strikers Say Leader Helped Break Morale,” *El Paso Herald*, 7.

<sup>115</sup> Correspondence from Charles Whitcomb to Clemente Idar, 14 October 1922, Box 3, Folder 1, CNIP.

<sup>116</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Laura Idar, 03 October 1922, Box 1, Folder 18, CNIP.

<sup>117</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, 16 October 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

services of those who [they] see fit to accept work in its shops.” He continued, “Instead of being an agreement between workers and employers it is a dictation of terms to strikebreakers.”<sup>119</sup> The shopmen’s strike dragged on into 1923 in some parts of the country, but the national character of the strike was over. In El Paso, the noise and the racket could again be heard in the railroad shop.

### *Conclusion*

The decline of the strike in El Paso can partly be attributed to the internal problems within the labor movement’s structure: inability to combat strike fatigue, internal craft-based divisions, lack of support from non-shopman railway employees including members of the Big Four, and the RED’s tactics might also be questioned. But these structural problems paled in comparison to the most important factor in the strike: the power of organized capital. Railroad owners demonstrated the power of organized capital by presenting a unified front against railway employees and sharing resources to combat the strike. They were also supported by a Republican Party which controlled the Executive and legislative branches.<sup>120</sup> The Harding administration attempted to mediate when trains began to fail and important resources stopped moving, but when push came to shove, the administration forced workers and not railroad corporations to relent by issuing a federal injunction against the railway shopmen’s strike. Ultimately, organized capital won the day.

What is important for our story is to recognize the strength transborder labor solidarity provided workers along the border. Clemente Idar had nurtured friendships and alliances prior to the strike and had begun crafting ideas for how to deploy them during labor conflict. When the 1922 Shopmen’s Strike occurred, he secured support from Mexican allies—politicians and labor

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<sup>119</sup> Correspondence from Samuel Gompers to Clemente Idar, 16 November 1922, Box 3, Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>120</sup> Davis, *Power at Odds*, 167.

leaders—in the form of funds, propaganda, public and private displays of solidarity, and, when possible, border crossing restrictions. He showed how transborder labor solidarity could be transformed into targeted union power.

Clemente Idar's actions during the 1922 Shopmen's Strike also demonstrated a lesser known relationship between Mexican immigration and labor organizing. Both CROM and a small cadre of AFL organizers (Balt, Vargas, Idar) had a nuanced understanding of how Mexican unionized immigrants, when recruited by employers, easily subverted strikes. The AFL had to welcome unionized Mexican workers and sharply criticized the free flow of un-unionized workers. Labor leaders like Clemente Idar, encouraged Mexican workers to cross the border to join the picket line, but not to break strikes. Such sentiments were full of contradictions, but they rested on enough good faith that both sides could work together towards the shared goal of labor solidarity.

The fact that a federal injunction was needed to break the strike demonstrated how much of a threat these actions posed to organized capital. The moments of transborder solidarity here described attest to an important moment of historical possibility. A moment in the early 1920s when a labor leader like Idar imagined the creation of a potent, borderless, unionized labor force powerful enough to combat capitalist encroachments on worker rights. This was Idar's vision. Chapter Seven describes how Clement Idar and his allies worked to make this vision of transborder solidarity into official policy in the United States and Mexico.

## Chapter 6: LULAC and the Box Bill Affair, 1929

### *Introduction*

During the El Paso Railway Shopmen's Strike (Chapter 5), Clemente Idar recognized the potential of transborder solidarity to support, rather than inhibit, the U.S. labor movement. He leveraged alliances with Mexican labor unions to organize cross-border demonstrations of support, thwarted Mexican immigrant strikebreakers, and shored up picket lines using ethnic Mexican workers. He recognized that transborder solidarity was far from egalitarian. White workers discriminated against ethnic Mexicans, at times hurling racial epithets and ethnic slurs against them.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these same White workers accepted assistance from ethnic Mexicans, so long as they were marching on the union side of the picket-line. Idar, along with other organizers like Canuto Vargas, witnessed first-hand these moments of transborder solidarity which helped shape their view that ethnic Mexican workers could add value to the U.S. labor movement and that unions could become the key to uplifting ethnic Mexicans' status in the U.S.

An anti-union view was also gaining ground among ethnic Mexican leaders living near the U.S.-Mexico border. After World War I (1914-1918), a small cadre of upwardly mobile ethnic Mexican professionals and economic elites in Texas came to see unions as a threat to the south Texas agricultural economy. Many were founding fathers of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a Mexican American civil rights organization formed in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas. LULAC established goals for the betterment of their community within a framework defined by distinct economic and class interests. They promoted the agricultural economy of south Texas which created opportunities for hardworking entrepreneurs and they fought against prejudice in schools, courts, and public spaces (restaurants and movie theatres).

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<sup>1</sup> Colin J. Davis, *Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike*, *The Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 69-70.

Their focus was on areas of society distinct from those Idar focused on. Although Idar also played a prominent role in LULAC's formation, he saw the fields and the factories as the principal site of his activism. And while both factions fought for ethnic Mexican civil rights, their strategies did not align and often clashed, revealing emerging fault lines within LULAC. The subject which publicly revealed those fault lines was immigration and the subsequent "Box Bill Affair" in 1930.

The "Box Bill Affair" occurred in January of 1930, when three of LULAC's founding members testified before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization (HCIN) to oppose Congressman John C. Box' bill intended to reduce the number of Mexican immigrants entering the country (The Box Bill). The three LULAC members providing testimony were José Tomás (J.T.) Canales, Ben Garza, and Alonso S. Perales. Soon after the three testified, two other members of LULAC sent a telegram to the HCIN, stating that Canales, Garza, and Perales, had no standing to represent LULAC before the committee, signed by Manuel C. González and Clemente N. Idar. The mixed signals from LULAC confused the congressional committee members and infuriated Canales, Garza, and Perales, who accused González and Idar of trying to embarrass them. The three also accused Idar of being a henchman of organized labor.

This chapter studies this clash as a proxy battle over each LULAC leader's views on immigration, which can be placed into three broad categories. The first was an economic approach, represented by Canales and Garza who wanted to protect the interests of business owners and landowners, like themselves, in order to maintain a dynamic economy that allowed hardworking Mexicans to climb the social and economic ladders of border society. Immigration restriction was anathema to them because it cut-off the supply of low-wage workers needed to sustain south Texas' agricultural economy.

The second was a civic rights approach, represented by Perales. He viewed any prejudice directed on the basis of race and/or ethnicity as a badge of dishonor and an obstacle to full incorporation into the mainstream of Anglo-American society. For Perales, immigration restriction itself was not a problem, so long as it was not based on prejudicial views of Mexicans as an inferior people—which is exactly how he understood the premise of the Box Bill.

Lastly was a labor-oriented approach, represented by Clemente Idar who, unlike the others, supported the Box Bill's restrictions on Mexican immigration. Idar believed labor unions offered protection to the ethnic Mexican workers, native and immigrant alike. Unchecked immigration was the tool agriculturalists used to maintain low-wage workers in their industry.

This chapter outlines these three approaches to immigration showing how each LULAC' view was influenced by their unique pathways to success in the border region, and reveals the effect Mexican immigrant workers would have on LULAC's future and by proxy the ethnic Mexican community of Texas. This first section provides an overview of the Box Bill and the historical context in which it arose. It will then turn to Canales, Garza, and Perales' testimony before the HCIN in 1930. Lastly, it will analyze influential events in Idar's work that prompted his action at the Box Bill hearing and lead to his expulsion from LULAC.

#### *The Mexican Exception in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act*

To reduce Mexican immigrants to the United States, John Calvin Box, Democratic Congressman from East Texas, introduced a bill in 1926 to remove the "Western Hemisphere exception" from the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. During the early 1920s, Mexican workers had become the immigrant boogeyman *par excellence*. Their position within the labor economy was the result of a combination of factors at the state, national and international level, including the Mexican Revolution, World War I, African-American migration to the U.S. north, European immigration

restrictions, and the rise of the agricultural industry in the Southwest. These factors simultaneously reduced the available workforce in the United States while creating a need for more workers in agriculture.

At the state level, during the late 1910s, Mexican immigrants had become the main source of labor for a Texas economy that had transitioned from ranching to agricultural production. This transition was long in the making. Central Texan farmers were experimenting with cotton farming as early as the late nineteenth century but south Texas lagged behind due to the lack of irrigation and limited low-cost transportation options to carry farming products to markets outside of Texas.<sup>2</sup> In 1902, the U.S. government passed the Reclamation Act which subsidized costs for land clearance and irrigation projects to make dry, “un-improved” land farmable in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.<sup>3</sup> In 1904, an alliance of Texas entrepreneurs—including Robert J. Kleberg II, Robert Driscoll, Uriah Lott, Richard King, James B. Wells, Francisco Yturria, and John G. Kenedy—pooled their funds and completed the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway, connecting the south Texas city of Brownsville to the Missouri-Pacific national railroad.<sup>4</sup> This transportation improvement created a farming bonanza, “by 1907, the three-year old railway was hauling...five hundred carloads of farm products from the [Rio Grande] Valley.”<sup>5</sup> During this period, the size of land holdings shrunk and the number of cattle heads declined, indicating a move

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<sup>2</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, *They Should Stay There: The Story of Mexican Migration and Repatriation During the Great Depression*, ed. Russ Davidson and Mark Overmyer-Velázquez (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 11-12; James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 67-69.

<sup>4</sup> Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

away from raising livestock to agriculture.<sup>6</sup> The agricultural industry in South Texas was underway and Mexicans and Mexican Americans became the laborers of choice.

As one late-nineteenth-century Texas cotton farmer stated, “I have employed in cultivation almost entirely Mexican laborers [and]... Such labor is abundant [south of the] Nueces River and can be secured at 75 cents a day.”<sup>7</sup> He was one of many who increasingly came to depend on Mexican labor during the pre-war era. Historian Adam Goodman notes, “Mexican immigration shot up, going from an average of just a few hundred per year between 1899 and 1907 to around 15,600 in 1909.”<sup>8</sup> The trend to employ Mexican labor continued and augmented in the late 1910s when thousands of able-bodied young men went to fight in World War I and thousands of African-Americans left Texas to escape prejudice and fill wartime needs in northern factories. From 1910 to 1921, an average of 20,000 Mexicans each year crossed the border, many fleeing revolution and displacement, to fill the void left in the wake of internal U.S. migration.<sup>9</sup> By the 1920s, Texas was dependent on an agricultural economy fueled by the labor of Mexican immigrants.

Changes at the state level in Texas began to parallel changes at the national level where Mexican labor and agriculture became increasingly vital to the United States economy. The Immigration Act of 1917 was a key factor in this transition. There had been other laws restricting immigration prior to this date but they targeted distinct groups and immigrants deemed undesirable.<sup>10</sup> The Immigration Act of 1917 was unique in that it was the culmination of over two

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<sup>6</sup> In three south Texas counties, Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron, the number of cattle fell to almost half (174, 513 to 99, 597 head of cattle). See, *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Goodman, *Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The aspect of the law barring a region of the globe was part of a long legacy of anti-Asian immigrant sentiment, emanating particularly from California. This sentiment took legal form

decades of work by immigration restrictionists who had advocated for a literacy test in order to stem immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. During the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, successive presidential administrations successfully vetoed bills to apply a literacy test to immigration requirements. By 1917 and before American entry into the war, a number of factors including anti-German sentiment created by World War I, fear of radicalism amidst the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the recommendations from the infamous Dillingham Commission, created the impetus to override President Woodrow Wilson's veto and pass the 1917 Immigration Act.<sup>11</sup>

The 1917 Act forbade from entry to the United States any single person over 16 years of age, or heads of household, who could not read English (or their native language). It created a "barred zone" extending from the Middle East to Southeast Asia; secured earlier restrictions such

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through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1885 Foran Act (also known as the Alien Contract Labor Law), and the 1907 Gentleman's agreement. The latter was not a law, but a bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Japan to stop Japanese immigration. These laws and agreements were based on the belief that Asian immigrants were likely to be foreign contract laborers, anarchists, prostitutes, diseased, and, "likely to become a public charge." The other aspect of the law, the literacy test, was aimed at European immigrants. See, John Weber, *From South to Texas to the Nation: The Exploration of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2015), 104; On the high numbers of Mexican immigration to Texas prior to 1917 see, Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1993), 10-19; Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991), 28-29; Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931: Socio-Economic Patterns*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), 18-37; Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, (Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1976), 3-17; On restrictions to Asian Immigration see, Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 3; On restrictions to European immigration see, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 97-101.

<sup>11</sup> Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 162-163, 188-193, 201-204; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 19.

as on those “likely to become a public charge” and the “anti-contract labor law” provisions; extended the statute of limitations for deportation from three to five years; and doubled the head tax from four to eight dollars.<sup>12</sup>

These restrictions were short-lived. Between February of 1917, when the act was passed, and May 1<sup>st</sup>, the date of its enactment, the United States entered the World War I (April 2, 1917). Farmers and industrialists began calling for exemptions to the immigration laws, citing wartime labor needs in the agricultural fields and manufacturing centers. They sent countless letters of protest to the Department of Labor and Bureau of Immigration Service; and filled the mail boxes of congressmen, and senators all calling for more Mexican immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Less than a month after the law went into effect, on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, Secretary of Labor, William B. Wilson, suspended many of the new requirements for the agricultural industry including the head tax, literacy test, and contract labor provision.<sup>14</sup> A year later, Wilson extended the exemptions for the railroad and mining industry.<sup>15</sup> The exemptions were meant to be temporary, but after the war ended, farmers protested any changes to the system, arguing that economies would be sunk, fortunes destroyed, and national

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<sup>12</sup> Weber, *South Texas to the Nation*, 105; Otey M. Scruggs, “The First Mexican Farm Labor Program,” *Journal of the Southwest*, Arizona and the West, Vol. 2, no. 4 (Winter 1960), 320; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Employers who wanted Mexican workers had to follow a highly bureaucratic procedure including: filing applications listing number of workers needed, type of work to be done, wages, length of employment, pay dates, housing amenities, and place of employment. They were supposed to report if worker transferred to another job, or left employment. Workers were even provided identification cards. This highly bureaucratized process set the template for the World War II Bracero Program which took effect in August of 1942. See, Scruggs, “The First Mexican Farm Labor Program,” 321-322.

vulnerabilities created if agriculturalists no longer had easy access to Mexican workers. These exemptions in some areas lasted until 1923.<sup>16</sup>

Mexican labor emerged as the focal point of the agricultural economy at the same time that changes to manufacturing at the macro level decreased the need for European workers. As historian Mae Ngai explains, “industrial capitalism had matured to the point where economic growth could come more from technological advances in mass production *than from* the continued expansion of the manufacturing work-force.”<sup>17</sup> U.S. manufacturing centers in the Midwest and Northeast, traditionally worked by European immigrants, could now produce the same volume of goods with less manpower. As the economy shifted towards agriculture, Southern and Eastern European workers became expendable, creating the economic justification to pass legislation curtailing their immigration. These economic justifications coincided with a growing nativism, heightened by World War I nationalism, and post-war economic recession.

Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act in 1921 creating a temporary, annual limit to visas based on a “national origins formula,” which set the number of visas from any one country to 3% of the number of persons residing in the United States from said country based on the 1910 census. Western Hemisphere immigrants from Mexico and Canada were exempted. By 1923, it was clear that a stricter, permanent law was going to be passed. Restrictionists wanted the new law to exclude the Western hemisphere exception. Although James J. Davis, President Calvin Coolidge’s Secretary of Labor, crafted an immigration bill which removed the Western Hemisphere exception, it was eclipsed by Congressman Albert Johnson’s bill which maintained

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 19 [emphasis mine].

it.<sup>18</sup> Johnson, who chaired the House Immigration Committee, was sympathetic to restrictionists' concerns about Mexico but did not believe the bill would pass if Mexico and Canada were included.

In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act (also called The National Origins Act) was passed, with the Western Hemisphere exception intact. This new law capped total immigration at 165,000 per year and calculated the amount of visa allotments using an amended "national origins formula." Now, each nation received their share of visas based on 2% of the foreign-born population (and their descendants) residing in the United States using the 1890 census. The legislation was crafted to favor immigrants from Great Britain and Western Europe while limiting Southern and Eastern Europeans (in particular Italians, Greeks, Poles, and Slavs).<sup>19</sup> Ngai writes that the Western Hemisphere exception catered to the "need for labor in southwestern agriculture." The law removed one workforce, Europeans, while promoting another, Mexicans.<sup>20</sup>

The restrictionists were not silenced by the failure to include Mexico under the quota system and continued to call for limiting Mexican immigration. Their cries only grew louder and a collection (not quite an alliance) of "local governments with aliens on their relief rolls," progressives, small farmers, eugenicists, racists, nativists, and union leaders increased pressure on elected leaders to restrict Mexican immigration. On the other side of the debate were the "large-

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<sup>18</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, "The AFL and Mexican Immigration in the 1920s: An Experiment in Labor Diplomacy," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (1968): 208.

<sup>19</sup> The quota formula did not include descendants of people from the Western Hemisphere which was moot because no cap existed on visas for migrants coming from the western hemisphere. See Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

scale growers of sugar beets, cotton, and vegetables, allied with railroads, chamber of commerce, and business associations.”<sup>21</sup>

The restrictionists eventually found a champion in John Calvin Box, a Democratic Congressman from East Texas, who immediately began introducing and promoting bills to amend the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act in order to place Mexico under the quota system. He introduced one such bill during the first two months of 1926 before the 69<sup>th</sup> United States Congress.<sup>22</sup> Box’s bill was debated before the HNIC, but died in committee. He reintroduced a 2nd Box Bill in 1928 and the same committee reconvened on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1929 to debate whether the Western Hemisphere exemption should be removed, or as one LULAC member re-phrased, to consider, “placing [Mexico] under... the quota basis.”<sup>23</sup> LULAC members had specific views on the efficacy and ideological grounds for the Box Bill which can be divided into three categories—the Business View, the Stigma of Inferiority View, and the Labor View.

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<sup>21</sup> Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson,: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 26.

<sup>22</sup> The bill sought to remove the Western Hemisphere exemption entirely. However, it was clear that Box’ main focus was undoubtedly Mexico, indicated by his simultaneous support for a bill proposed by Congressman Robert L. Bacon (R-NY), H.R. 7559, which would have applied the quota to Mexico, but not Canada, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, South America, and certain “adjacent islands.” For both Box and Bacon, Mexican immigration, not immigration in general, was their central concern. See, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Western Hemisphere Immigration: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, Second Session, on the Bills, H.R. 8523, H.R. 8530, H.R. 8702, to Limit the Immigration of Aliens to the United States, and for Other Purposes.* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930), 3-4 (herein cited as, Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930).

<sup>23</sup> Correspondence from Ben Garza to Clemente N. Idar and M.C. Gonzales, March 02, 1930, Box 7 Folder 14, Clemente N. Idar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin (cited herein as CNIP).

*The Business of Mexican Immigration: J.T. Canales and Ben Garza*

Both J.T. Canales and Ben Garza helped found LULAC, the latter serving as the league's first president. Both were entrenched in the agricultural economy of south Texas, albeit Canales holding a much more significant position.<sup>24</sup> Both were interested in maintaining a robust agricultural economy in south Texas. Like other agriculturalists, they worried about the Box Bill because they feared the loss of low-wage Mexican labor. They were also Mexican Americans, concerned with discrimination, increasingly aimed at the ethnic Mexican community as a whole. Their opposition to the Box Bill advanced economic and humanitarian reasons reflecting their interests.

José Tomás Canales was a giant of Mexican American civil rights history. Born on March 7, 1877, and raised on a ranch in south Texas, near the border city of Brownsville. His family were descendants of José Salvador de la Garza, who received the Espiritu Santo Spanish land grant in northern New Spain, just east of the Rio Grande in what would become Cameron County. Canales attended Texas Business College in Austin (1890-1892) for his secondary education, entered the University of Michigan in 1896, and graduated with a law degree in 1899.<sup>25</sup> He practiced law in Corpus Christi from 1900 to 1903 then moved to Brownsville and worked for the tax accessor's office in Cameron County. Lawyers in the Rio Grande Valley were uniquely positioned to attain

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<sup>24</sup> On February 17, 1929, in Corpus Christi, Texas three south Texas's organizations—the Order of Sons of America (OSA), the Order of Knights of America (OKA), and the League of Latin American Citizens (LLAC)—united to form the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). According to LULAC's constitution the organization was restricted to American citizens of ethnic Mexican descent, and its purpose was to develop the “best, purest, and most perfect type” of citizen amongst “members of our race” and to eradicate “discrimination [directed at] our fellow-citizens on account of race, religion, or social position.” See, Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Michael John Lynch III, “South Texas Renaissance Man: The Humanitarian, Political, and Philanthropic Activities of Judge J.T. Canales” (PhD, Kingsville, Texas, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, 1996), 6.

wealth because they could serve as brokers and land transfer experts in a region where land disputes and uncertain record keeping were common. Canales thrived in south Texas. Historian Cynthia Orozco notes that by 1930 the Canales family owned thirty thousand acres of land, “four thousand head of cattle...[and] had interests in cotton, banking, and commerce.”<sup>26</sup> From 1905 to 1920, he served as a Texas state legislator.

In 1918, Representative Canales launched a crusade against the Texas Rangers, in response to four years of violence they perpetrated upon the Tejano community in the aftermath of the 1915 Plan de San Diego.<sup>27</sup> During the start of the 1919 Texas legislature, he filed nineteen charges against the Texas Rangers and introduced legislation to severely curtail the police force and subject it to local control. For his actions, Canales was harassed and intimidated, activities that nearly cost him his life. His original bill failed. Instead, a watered down, much weaker version of it passed, stripped of reform and condemnations. The publicity he created forced reform due to all the misdeeds brought to the surface by the hearings.<sup>28</sup> His wealth, prominence, and civil rights activism made him a natural founding father of LULAC, an organization he remained active in until his death in 1976. His history also made him a unique opponent of the Box Bill. The bill had the possibility of affecting two aspects of his life—his work on behalf of Mexican American civil rights and the health of his economic endeavors.

Ben Garza, although born in the same city, had quite a different story. He was born in 1892, in Brownsville, to Mexican parents, Bernardo and María de Jesús Flores de la Garza. His father,

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<sup>26</sup> Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin H. Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands*.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 169-175.

Bernardo Sr., died when Garza was a teenager. The Garzas moved to Rockport (30 miles north of Corpus Christi) where Bernardo Jr. completed the sixth grade, his last year of formal education. Soon he began waiting tables to support his family, eventually moving to Corpus Christi where he leveraged a wealth of experience as a restaurant worker into an ownership stake in the Metropolitan Café. In 1926, his rags to riches arc was achieved when he took full ownership of the restaurant. The term “prominent citizen” is hard to define, but Garza, by the age of thirty-seven, was the president of the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce, leader of a chapter of the Woodmen of the World, owner of a restaurant that catered to “the better class of people,” and President of LULAC.<sup>29</sup> He undoubtedly was a prominent citizen.

Both Canales and Garza were advocates for Mexicans and Mexican American civil rights in Texas and equally invested in the health of a south Texas economy fueled by low-wage Mexican workers. Both were active leaders within their respective Chamber of Commerce organizations. Canales, speaking before the HCIN, stated that he represented not one but, “the Chamber of Commerce of Brownsville, Mercedes, [Weslaco], Harlingen, [McAllen and], Alamo.”<sup>30</sup> An English-language newspaper in Texas reported that Garza and Canales were traveling to Washington D.C. as:

opponents of the Box and Johnson measures and will seek to show that the agricultural industry of the southwest will be seriously crippled should drastic legislation be enacted at this time, which would result in the immediate stoppage of seasonal agricultural labor supply from Mexico [and]...They will also present evidence to refute charges of undesirability of Latin Americans citizens which have been made by sponsors of the proposed bill.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For more information on Ben Garza see, Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 115-117; Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 260.

<sup>30</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 169.

<sup>31</sup> “Ben Garza Goes to Washington to Aid in Fight on Immigration Bills,” Undated Clipping, Box 1, Folder/Album 2, Ben Garza Collection, LULAC Archives, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin.

Garza testified before the HCIN on the morning of January 31, 1930. His testimony incorporated his personal story to argue for the importance of the agricultural economy in the lives of ethnic Mexicans in the region as the personification of the LULAC ideal. LULAC, he told the committee, taught ethnic Mexicans to:

work for and look forward to higher and better things in life [and to instill] patriotism and citizenship and encouraging them to educate themselves so that they may not only make a better living but they may make a more substantial contribution to the citizenship of our country.<sup>32</sup>

As a self-made man and entrepreneur turned prominent citizen, he was living evidence of how ethnic Mexicans could rise within the socioeconomic world of south Texas so long as opportunities existed. He told the committee that he owned one of the leading restaurants in Corpus Christi, a business venture connected to the health of south Texas' agricultural economy: "What I have done by hard work all these years I am afraid I would lose if we did not have sufficient labor to gather our crops." Later adding, "if this source of labor is cut off, everything I have made in my life by hard work...will be lost; [and] [f]rom an economic standpoint the restriction of Mexican labor would, I am certain, be a tremendous blow to south Texas generally."<sup>33</sup> Mexican immigrants propelled the economy both as laborers consumers. In his 1930 study of Nueces County (Ben Garza's residence), sociologist Paul Taylor observed that "Mexican labor is intimately related to the structure and expansion of Nueces County agriculture." During the 1929 harvest season (July-

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<sup>32</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 258-260.

<sup>33</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 259-260; During the testimony, Garza never mentioned owning farmland, yet according to an interview with his wife, years later, the family bought large tracts of land before he passed away in 1937. See, Adelaida Garza, "Talk with Mrs. Ben Garza and Family," Corpus Christi, 08 March 1981 (Compact Disc), Box 1 1A-1B, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Archives, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

September), some 25,000 cotton pickers entered the county, which had a population hovering around 50,000 in the 1930 census.<sup>34</sup> The number of Mexican clerks employed in Corpus Christi's retail stores increased during cotton picking season to cater to Mexican immigrant consumers.<sup>35</sup> Mexican immigration was key to south Texas's economy and Garza's testimony warned that reducing Mexican immigration not only threatened the labor supply to farms but also the economic health of surrounding farm communities.

Canales argued that immigration restrictions created negative effects for ethnic Mexicans, citing civil rights violations in his region of south Texas (Cameron County) due to the blunt force used by the recently created Border Patrol. Canales called the Border Patrol, formed in 1924, "obnoxious over here [wanting] to "make a good showing....so as to keep them in their jobs."<sup>36</sup> He charged the overzealous Border Patrol with depriving farmers of a workforce explaining:

men who have been here cannot be wrongfully taken away from us and shoved across the river and left there. We would never have had the scarcity of labor that we have had if it had not been for that [the Border Patrol].<sup>37</sup>

The agency was completely ignoring citizenship laws as granted to ethnic Mexicans by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Here he used a similar line of argument to that of Nicasio Idar (Clemente's father) who had argued in 1910 and 1911, in his newspaper, *La Crónica*, that ethnic Mexicans were legally white and thus qualified for rights of citizenship.<sup>38</sup> Canales even used the agreements within the treaty to defend Mexicans who were deported for not crossing the border via official ports of entry. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo afforded Mexicans citizenship in the United

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<sup>34</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 89-92, 98-99.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>36</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter three of the dissertation.

States if they remained in lands annexed by the U.S.. Canales claimed to have successfully stayed several deportations by demonstrating that his Mexican clients were citizens. The nuance of these laws was lost on the border patrolmen.<sup>39</sup> He also highlighted the way new immigration laws disrupted customary travel patterns that threatened the family unit:

Men who have bought homes and have their wives there and have American-born children, have been deported and put on the other side of the river, leaving their wives and their children and their homes on this side. Why? Because maybe, in one instance, the man was unable to read or write.<sup>40</sup>

Immigration laws, already on the books, created problems that violated international agreements and the sanctity of the family.

During the transition from ranching to farming, Mexican immigrants had become essential to south Texas agriculture.<sup>41</sup> They were in particular demand during planting and harvesting, or as Canales put it, Mexican laborers arrived to south Texas in the early spring to “plant cotton and gather crop” then in early fall, around Mexican Independence Day (September 16<sup>th</sup>), “when they would become a menace to us...they would leave of their own accord.”<sup>42</sup> Large pools of laborers were needed when crops were ready. They needed to be picked “almost overnight” in order to profit.<sup>43</sup> For Canales and Garza, historic migratory patterns provided Mexican labor when needed, and dispensable when not.<sup>44</sup> Canales explained that farmers needed “native labor” already

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<sup>39</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 171; The Treaty of Guadalupe provided Mexicans living in the ceded territory to become American citizens and retain their assets including land. See, Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 62-62.

<sup>40</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 175.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176. On seasonal patterns of Mexican work and migration, see, Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier*, 98-99.

<sup>43</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 259.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 377; Marshall Roderick argues that Canales’ statements about race and environment were a “brilliant rhetorical move” to combat nativist arguments, implying Canales did not

“acclimated” to the Southwest’s environment, whose ancestors have lived [in the Southwest] for a thousand years...” and were thus able to complete “four times as much” as outsiders. Using a map of the United States as a teaching tool, he pointed to the Southwest and claimed it “impossible for the white man to adjust himself until he lives there long enough to be acclimated.”<sup>45</sup> In this explanation, Canales assumed that native labor meant Mexican laborers; the term “northerners” was understood interchangeably with Anglo or white. Northerners would not work in the fields of this region because they never confronted a climate like the one in the Southwest, a place where, “the day is so hot that you can almost cook an egg in the sun at noon, and you almost freeze to death at night.”<sup>46</sup> Garza put forth a similar argument. Mexican labor was the only option because “laborers of Anglo-Saxon extraction” would not do the same work of—“grubbing, pick and shovel work, cotton picking, and so forth.” When asked why, he replied, because “The climatic conditions are such that no other white race can stand it.”<sup>47</sup>

These views on Mexican American affinity for agricultural work were espoused by a host of other witnesses before the HCIN. For example, Samuel Parker Frisselle, a member of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, the California Development Association, and the California Federated Farm Bureau, owned five thousand acres of land and opposed restriction because he claimed a need for high quantities of laborers during harvest, work white men could not, or would not do.<sup>48</sup>

Another representative of the California Agricultural Labor Committee, Olger B. Burtness,

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believe them to be true, but rather used nativist ideas to ensure the Box Bill would not pass. I have not found evidence to support this and it seems more likely that Canales meant what he was saying. See, Marshall Roderick, “The ‘Box Bill’: Public Policy, Ethnicity, and Economic Exploitation in Texas” (Master’s Thesis, San Marcos, Texas, Texas State University, 2011), 73.

<sup>45</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 170.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>48</sup> Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*, 26-27.

explained that “no other laborer could... [withstand] the high temperature.”<sup>49</sup> Fred Roberts, a farmer from Corpus Christi, claimed Mexican farm labor was “doing work that no one else in the world will do.”<sup>50</sup> Arthur S. Bent, a contractor in Los Angeles and representative of the United States Chamber of Commerce said it was:

inappropriate to extend the principle of the quota to Mexico... regardless of the wisdom or unwisdom of the situation, as a matter of fact a very large industry—the agricultural industry—had been built up in the southwestern part of this country running into hundreds of millions of dollars—built up on the casual labor of the Mexican, the only laborer we have had who will do the stooping and bending work required by those crops under a temperature that runs up to 140 [degrees].<sup>51</sup>

These arguments revealed a sense of entitlement to Mexican labor, demanding a better labor control system to ensure that laborers from south Texas did not migrate out of the region. Canales criticized the landowners in Central Texas who “steal our labor and take it up to central Texas” adding, “our people were stolen from us and left us, left our fields without any cotton pickers; they were stolen and taken off.”<sup>52</sup> All this was done, according to him, “under the false pretense that wages were better 200 miles north,” adding that sometimes workers were “stranded... after fares collected.”<sup>53</sup> Possessive nouns laced his testimony. He was not looking for open borders. He wanted a stable low wage labor force. Canales revealed this view when he offhandedly suggested:

If you can pass a law to prevent their taking the men away from our section, or even from the State, it will be agreeable to us...If you can, in your bill, amend it by remedying that situation, providing that when this labor, or these people, get there, they should not be taken from us and sent away up there to the north, you understand, we think that would be a good thing.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 546.

<sup>50</sup> Roderick, “The ‘Box Bill’,” 45.

<sup>51</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Garza made a similar remark, “if a proper arrangement could be made so that we would get all the labor we want in the harvest time of crops, that is all we would ask.”<sup>55</sup> Both Garza and Canales wanted a steady labor force.

Canales and Garza’s opposition to the Box Bill was multifaceted, combining a paternalistic commitment to ethnic Mexican rights with a sense of entitlement to their labor. It should not be lost on the reader that these were two of the most influential founding members of LULAC. It would be too simple to write them off as self-interested capitalists who chose greed over ethnic loyalty. Rather, a better way to categorize them is as complex individuals with personal and community interests.

Garza believed that a healthy economy would provide opportunities to upward mobility for hard-working Mexicans like himself. Canales protested the ill effects immigration laws had on workers whose lives involved crossing the border throughout their lifetime, arguing that they should not be prevented from their traditional migrations (so long as they did not wander too far north). Their protests against the Box Bill need to be understood through this context. There was another LULAC founding father who offered a distinct critique of the Box Bill which departed drastically, both in substance and style, from the testimony of Canales and Garza. His name was Alonso S. Perales.

*Stigma of Inferiority View: Alonso S. Perales*

Perales was a lawyer entrenched in the world of diplomacy and international relations with a résumé that included law school, military service during World War I, and a number of posts in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 260.

diplomatic missions.<sup>56</sup> He had professional success and his work experiences in courtrooms and offices, interacting with diplomats and politicians. He went on speaking tours, conducted letter writing campaigns, and penned editorials in Spanish language newspapers. He was the consummate ethnic Mexican professional and his opposition to the Box Bill in many ways reflected these experiences.

He believed Box's legislation targeted Mexicans based on the faulty presumption that they were an inferior people and unfit for citizenship. This belief was well-defined in both his oral testimony and the written statement he submitted to the HCIN, which came in the form of a short essay citing historians, psychologists, and American leaders.

Perales opposed the bill for its prejudicial assumptions about Mexicans, not for economic reasons. Perales almost entirely omitted the economics of immigration:

Being a Mexican by blood, and being just as proud of my racial extraction as I am of my American citizenship, I feel it my duty to deny most emphatically that the Mexican race is inferior to any other race, and I have quoted authorities here in support of my statement.<sup>57</sup>

The committee asked him whether he believed immigrants lowered "economic standards [of living and created] a surplus of employees in all lines of labor."<sup>58</sup> Perales deflected and stated, "so long as you limit your issue to the economic phases of this problem, I have nothing to say. I am an American citizen, and I am for the American people." Congressman Rutherford sensed the hidden

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<sup>56</sup> Included in his testimony, was his resume, which included: The Conference in Central American Affairs (1922, 1923), the Inter-American High Commission, the Plebiscitary Commission Tacna-Arica Arbitration (1925-1926), the Sixth Pan-American Conference (1928), the General and Special Claims Commissions (1928), the American Electoral Mission in Nicaragua (1928), the International Conference of American States on Conciliation and Arbitration (1928-1929), and the Commission of Inquiry and Conciliation-Bolivia and Paraguay (1929-1930). See, Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 182-183.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

message in Perales' tone asking, "Have you any reason to believe from the wording of this bill that there is any other purpose?"

I have reason to believe because of my experience in Texas, that perhaps it may be just a desire on the part of the American citizens of Teutonic or northern extraction to ... exclude any other people who do not belong to that extraction, for instance, the Mexicans, who descend from two great races, the Indian and the Spanish. ...Where two races come in contact prejudice arises and naturally the dominating race wants to exclude the other; and I am inclined to believe ...that is one of the reasons [for restriction].<sup>59</sup>

Mr. Green asked, "should [we] have restrictions on immigration from Mexico into the United States?" Perales answered:

if the sponsors of this bill or any other bill can prove that the Mexicans—that is those from Mexico—are a menace to the American workingmen, because they come here and work for lower wages, then I say all right; good luck to you; more power to you. But if you have not the facts to prove that that is the reason...and avail yourselves of utterly fictitious reasons, such as racial inferiority, race degeneracy, then I say, gentlemen, you are absolutely wrong as to that; and that is why I have made this statement.<sup>60</sup>

Perales opposed the bill because he believed it was based on prejudicial opinions about the Mexican race. Whether or not unregulated Mexican immigrants hurt the overall economy was harder to surmise.

Both Garza and Canales granted that Mexican workers accepted lower wages, but both also believed this was due to the fact that no other laborers would do the difficult work. Perales told the committee that if they could prove Mexicans hurt Americans workers by accepting lower wages then "I say all right; good luck to you." Was this meant to be a rhetorical statement made by a person who believed the premise to be false or was he genuinely stating a possible condition under which he would support restriction? This question gets to the essence of Perales' testimony at the Box Bill hearings—was the bill about prejudice or economics.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 180.

David Gutiérrez interpreted Perales' statement as "qualified support of restrictive immigration legislation" as long as the bill's sponsors could prove the ill effects of Mexican immigration on the American worker.<sup>61</sup> Marshall Roderick claimed Gutiérrez made the wrong inference writing that Perales' qualification was a "rhetorical device ... [because Perales] took it as obvious that the claim could not be proven."<sup>62</sup> For Roderick, both LULAC and Perales were "overwhelmingly pro-immigration." These conflicting readings of Perales' testimony reveal an important question: Did Perales support continued immigration from Mexico? Or was he willing to lend support to restriction, as long as it was based on economics, and not the presumption of innate inferiority? Perales' written testimony sheds light on this question.

Therein he incorporated numerous studies, quotations, facts, and figures from historians and psychologists arguing that Mexicans were not innately inferior. All scholars cited in the work belonged to "your racial extraction" –a message directed to the all-White male committee members.

To prove the Mexicans were not intellectually inferior, he quoted Dr. Floyd Henry Allport, a professor of social and political psychology at the School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, who held that "social inheritance" and "environment" were *as* determinative as race (biology) in predicting intellectual aptitude. Any deficiencies amongst Mexicans were the result of social structures, not biological makeup. Allport deemed calls for immigrant exclusion, or their immediate assimilation, were wholly without merit because there was no proof that "uncontaminated" Americans held "the only desirable form of culture."

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<sup>61</sup> David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>62</sup> Roderick, "The 'Box Bill,'" 63-64.

Perales quoted authority, a journalist with a long acquaintance with Mexico, Carlton Beals who explained that, “a distinct cultural and racial type is slowly emerging from the mixture of the two great stocks, Iberian and Indian, and is called Mestizan [*sic*]...the mestizo is probably the Mexican of to-morrow [*sic*], the only Mexican that can withstand the pressure of the rising industrial system... he is a type that promises ultimately to be more tenacious, progressive, and peaceful than the purely Latin races, and more adaptable to modern civilization than the pure Indian.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Perales was quoting an American scholar echoing the famous “*raza cósmica*” thesis made popular by Mexican public intellectual, José Vasconcelos. Mestizos—mix of Spanish and Indian—would be the race of the future because they held the best combination of traits to excel in the modern world.<sup>64</sup> Perales ceded that the “white race” was probably, momentarily, superior to the Mexican one, but with time and work Mexicans could ascend.

Why few Mexicans had positions of power in the United States, Perales quoted Army Colonel L.M. Maus, who believed that any defects were products of prejudice of being “ignored, treated as aliens, and often shown less consideration than the Indians, or even the Negro since his emancipation.”<sup>65</sup>

Perales was singularly focused, perhaps fixated, on prejudice, quite divorced from any of the economic arguments made by Canales and Garza. The only mention of economics in his essay emerged when he cited scholar, George McCutcheon McBride, to show how wages in Mexico were on the whole lower than those in the United States and that they also differed from region to

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<sup>63</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 185.

<sup>64</sup> José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: misión de la Raza iberoamericana, notas de viajes a la América del Sur* (Madrid: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925).

<sup>65</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 187.

region within Mexico.<sup>66</sup> This information was not used to make an economic argument for or against immigration, but rather as evidence that Mexicans were not intrinsically predisposed to working for lower wages.

Perales was conspicuously silent about the effects Mexican immigration had on American wages, let alone the exploitation Mexican workers faced in exploitative agricultural work. He concentrated on the effects racist laws would have on the characterization of Mexican people as a whole—people like him who were “Mexican by blood” and “just as proud of [their] racial extraction as [they were of their] American citizenship.”<sup>67</sup>

Unlike David Gutiérrez’s analysis, which argued that Perales and LULAC supported restriction and Roderick’s belief that Perales was “pro immigrant,” Perales viewed the Box Bill largely divorced from the actual migration of Mexican workers crossing the border. Despite having worked manual labor in his youth, after the age of sixteen he spent the rest of his life in classrooms, offices, and courtrooms. He was far removed from everyday Mexican laborers and his views on immigration reflected this position. He was committed to upward mobility into the professional class and opposed the stain the Box Bill would leave on people of Mexican descent. He was less-interested in the economic effects or even on the immigrants themselves. He seemed to have accepted the economic inequality of the labor market so long as that inequality was not explicitly racist. Perales’ activism reflected his vision for ethnic Mexicans’ upward mobility into the professional world absent of unfair and prejudicial obstacles.

Perales conveyed his opinion on the future of ethnic Mexican youth in a letter he wrote to Clemente Idar. On August 22, 1929 he explained to Idar that he envisioned “Mexican Americans”

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 180.

from Texas leaving the state and traveling north to school—as both Canales and he had done. Perales laid out the proper path to success: 1) learn English and Spanish, 2) graduate from high school, 3) take courses in stenography and typewriting, 4) learn to translate, 5) take the Civil Service Exam, 6) attend a University (suggested Georgetown School of Foreign Service), and 7) work for the government. If one did find a position within the government in Washington D.C., they should go to Chicago or New York and work at business firms with their stenography and typist skills or they could become lawyers, doctors, engineers, business administrators, or university professors. Was this practical? Yes, “entirely.” He had done it. He said he had “been thru the mill and what [he] had done any intelligent, ambitious, hardworking young Mexican American can accomplish [with] will-power, industry, grit and a firm determination to succeed.” To this end, he wanted LULAC to establish night schools so young men could learn the “Constitutional Law and American History and Government,” to learn about the world outside of Texas. “We must not lose sight of the fact that we are living in an era of specialization and keen competition.”<sup>68</sup> Perales’ recommendations for Mexican American youth were ambitious, but detached from the everyday lives of ethnic Mexican low-wage workers.

Canales, Garza, and Perales all testified before the HCIN in opposition to the Box Bill, but from the above analysis, it is clear their reasoning was quite different. Garza and Canales opposed the bill for the ill effects it would have on the south Texas economy, the type of economy that made it possible for a person like Garza, the president of LULAC, to go from rags to riches in Texas. Yet for Perales, the prejudice embedded in the legislation made it untenable and threatened to leave a stain on the Mexican community as a whole.

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<sup>68</sup> Correspondence from Alonso S. Perales to Clemente N. Idar, 22 August 1929, Box 7, Folder 2, CNIP.

*The Labor of Immigration: Clemente Idar*

Clemente Idar was five years older than Perales and by then had spent a decade organizing laborers throughout the Southwest where the workforce was overwhelmingly Mexican. He witnessed firsthand the unscrupulous labor practices used by labor agents and large-scale farmers, which left many Mexican workers in deplorable living conditions. Idar worked organizing laborers into unions and crafting an approach to his work that involved recruiting immigrants into U.S. labor unions and reducing immigration by informing potential migrants about the prejudice and discrimination present in the agricultural industry in the United States. He supported repatriation in certain contexts.

The laborers Idar was trying to organize were recruited to work in the United States under false pretenses. One of his colleagues, Canuto A. Vargas, described the unscrupulous tactics in a letter to AFL President Samuel Gompers dated July 29, 1920. Vargas, a longtime AFL organizer from Arizona, explained how a “bitter fight” was underway between labor unions and open shop advocates, the latter subjecting Mexican workers to “nothing short of slavery.” He explained how labor agents came to Mexico, making “flowery promises,” but failed to mention that transportation costs (to and from) were to be deducted from their wages.<sup>69</sup> Mexican immigrants were obligated to work their full term while also charged “extortionate prices” for basic necessities in farm commissary stores. By the end of their contract they owed more money than they had earned. This was not simply a matter of “illegal immigration” because even those that crossed legally were unable to quit and subject to employer demands. Vargas concluded if labor was needed in the

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<sup>69</sup> Peter J. Albert et al., eds., *The Samuel Gompers Papers: The Post War Years, 1918-1921*, vol. 11 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 339. Canuto A. Vargas was the Spanish language secretary of the Pan-American Federation of Labor from 1918-1925 and later labor attaché to the Mexican Embassy in Washington D.C., see, *Ibid*, 341, footnote 1.

United States, then a logical system should be installed that would “benefit not only those that need it, but...also ... those that furnish it.”<sup>70</sup>

At the time of Vargas’ letter, Idar was working in Central Texas’s cotton producing region. He was drawn to the region sometime in late 1919 by Miguel Pavia of Fentress, Texas who wanted to organize workers in his community.<sup>71</sup> Like the immigrants Vargas described, Idar learned that Mexicans on the farms of central Texas worked for low wages and could only buy merchandise at company stores. At the end of the harvest, after their debts were paid, they too found that their work resulted in only “a few dollars.” In his reports to the AFL, Idar described the position of Mexican workers: “There is no respect nor regard for the Mexican people working in this region of Texas;” their living conditions were “a shameful and humiliating spectacle to our civilization.”<sup>72</sup> He suggested that a reporter should come to the region and write an exposé with the headline, “Barbarous Texas,” a clear reference to John Kenneth Turner’s book *Barbarous Mexico*.<sup>73</sup>

Idar organized fifteen Farm Laborer locals in the region’s cities including Fentress, Luling, Lockhart, and Kyle, hoping to use their collective power to improve living conditions and raise

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>71</sup> “Miguel Pavia de Fentress, Tex.,” *La Unionista*, December 27, 1919, 3; “A todos los Mexicanos,” *La Unionista*, December 27, 1919, 3; Correspondence from Clemente N. Idar to Frank Morrison, 04 November 1920, Box 3, Folder 8, CNIP. Pavia was a well-known figure in the region who had cut his teeth as an active member of La Agrupación, a short-lived, decentralized confederation of local organizations formed in June of 1911 with ties to the Partido Liberal Mexicano. According to Emilio Zamora, Pavia led a contingent of eighty members out of La Agrupación because it had shifted away from PLM strategies in favor of “bourgeois interests.” See, Emilio Zamora, *World of the Mexican Workers in Texas*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 150.

<sup>72</sup> The following section describes the Fentress farming community based on three drafts of the same report by Clemente Idar addressed to Frank Morrison. They all have the same header but with different levels of detail in each. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 23 November 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>73</sup> John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico*, (1909; reis., University of Texas Press, 2014).

wages.<sup>74</sup> These actions drew the ire of Fentress landowners. On November 23, 1920, Idar reported an incident in which 3 people—Francisco Becerra, vice-president of the Fentress Farmer’s Local Union, Miguel Pavia, aforementioned community leader, and a female American schoolteacher (unnamed)—were attacked by a deputy sheriff and a landowner, for trying to improve the lives of ethnic Mexicans in the region through education, union organizing, and religious worship. School district trustees sent the sheriff to remove the teacher and nine students, which prompted Pavia to defend the school teacher and children. A “man named Harris pulled a pistol and threatened to kill Pavia,” then Harris fought with Becerra. The outcome of this fight is unknown. Later Idar wrote that a group of men, who he described as “Protestants,” attempted to enter the building during a union meeting, but were denied entrance. As a result, the union members were told that if they did not stop using the building for union purposes their contracts would be cancelled for the coming year.<sup>75</sup>

Idar’s report on this incident explained how central Texas Mexicans were exploited as workers, robbed of education in their native language, discriminated against because they were Catholic, and attacked for unionizing efforts. With Idar’s words used to describe the attackers—Protestant, landowner, trustees, sheriff—he indicated that there was a collusion between white land owners and law enforcement. This prejudice was widespread:

In spite of the fact that I am a native citizen of the United States there are no places in the towns mentioned where I [can]... enter a hotel, get a shave or a meal [Because] being of

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<sup>74</sup> Correspondence from Miguel Pavia to Clemente Idar, 09 February 1920, Box 2 Folder 3, CNIP; Correspondence from Miguel Pavia to Clemente Idar 27 [no month] 1920, Box 2 Folder 3, CNIP. On the geography of his organizing see, Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Frank Morrison, 23 November 1920, Box 3 Folder 8, CNIP.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Mexican extraction [,] I am [forever] a Mexican. My citizenship in that section is not recognized. You have no idea under what conditions I have struggled while traveling...<sup>76</sup>

Idar's point was clear, Mexicans—immigrant or native born—only had one position within the power structure of this Central Texas farming region-- at the bottom as manual laborers. As historian David Weber explains, Mexicans were expected to be nothing more than “laboring tourists” living on the periphery of society, “whose continued tolerance by Anglos in the United States required endless work without any efforts at social improvement.”<sup>77</sup> Mexicans were not expected to participate in any organizing efforts to carve out space or power in that system.

These exploitative labor conditions in central Texas coincided with a moment when the Mexican government was partially funding repatriation ventures for its citizens. As a result, some Mexicans turned to repatriation as a tool for relief. In December of 1920, *La Unionista* reported that Idar was helping to form an organization in San Marcos, TX, headed by Gonzalo G. González, named the *Union Colonizadora Mexicana* (UCM), to repatriate members onto Mexican farming land provided by the government. More than 800 Mexicans attended a UCM meeting in San Marcos with hundreds paying the initiation fee to join the organization. Idar later wrote to Mexico's Secretary of Agriculture and Development, Antonio I. Villareal, on the UCM's behalf, describing the difficult labor conditions in the region and requesting help in the organization's

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Though Clemente spoke English and came from a middle-class family, it was not uncommon for Mexican Americans to be denied. Anthropologist Manuel Gamio observed, “a person of medium-dark skin can enter a second-class lunchroom frequented also by Americans of the poorer class, but will not be admitted to a high-class restaurant. A Mexican of light-brown skin as a rule will not be admitted to a high-class hotel, while a white cultured Mexican will be freely admitted to the same hotel, especially if he speaks English fluently.” Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1930), 53.

<sup>77</sup> Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation*, 110-111.

efforts.<sup>78</sup> Four months later Villareal responded, commissioning Idar as an *Agente Honorario de Colonización* in Texas. The letter contained a list of available plots of land in Mexico along with instructions on eligibility and resettlement subsidies.<sup>79</sup> Idar helped during the early stages of the work, but ultimately left the matter to the leaders of the UCM.<sup>80</sup>

Idar's efforts to repatriate central Texas Mexicans was a response to the deplorable conditions workers endured. He claimed that by aiding the UCM he had hurt his own work as a union organizer. Repatriating workers meant diminishing the numbers of his newly formed unions. He felt obligated by the AFL's principles to help this program because it was "highly beneficial to the Mexicans who wished to repatriate themselves."<sup>81</sup>

In April of 1922, San Antonio's *La Prensa* reported that the whole UCM project had been abandoned.<sup>82</sup> The newspapers did not explain why, but apparently Mexican President Álvaro Obregón lost interest in this program. During the U.S. depression of 1920-1922, President Obregón had provided government support to help Mexicans return, subsidizing transportation, lowering import duties, and in some cases, providing land. To facilitate this, he established a "repatriation department" within his government's *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*.<sup>83</sup> Historian Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso notes that the Obregón administration "assisted in the repatriation of more than

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<sup>78</sup> "El movimiento de repatriación," *El Unionista*, December 30, 1920, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Correspondence from Antonio I. Villareal to Clemente N. Idar, Departamento de Dirección Agraria Colonización, Número 4901, 13 April 1921, Box 2 Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>80</sup> In response to Villareal's commission, Idar thanked him for the commission but said he would have to suspend his activity until he learned what steps E.G. González, president of the UCM, had taken while visiting Mexico City. See, Correspondence from Clemente Idar [unnamed, but confirmed via context of the letter] to Antonio I. Villareal, 04 June 1921, Box 2 Folder 10, CNIP.

<sup>81</sup> "El movimiento de repatriación," 2.

<sup>82</sup> "El Proyecto de la Unión Colonizadora de San Marcos, Texas ha sido abandonado por completo," *La Prensa*, April, 13, 1922, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Alanís Enciso, *They Should Stay There*, 20-21.

50,000 people.... Such support, however, dried up after the urgency of the situation had passed [circa 1922].”<sup>84</sup>

Idar’s support for the 1921 repatriation movement in Fentress, Texas, revealed his distinct approach to immigration. Idar was *not* driven by nativism, a preference for American born Mexicans, nor did he believe immigrants were racially or culturally inferior. He believed that workers suffered, farmers and industrialists profited, and unions weakened, when there existed a large supply of unemployed, un-unionized workers. In a letter dated February 10, 1921, Idar explained to his boss Samuel Gompers that, “Mexican people for many years have suffered the most cruel treatment...robbed of their money ... and abused in every way that human mind can possibly devise.”<sup>85</sup> Unregulated immigration, coupled with the exploitative labor practices of the agricultural industry, as the true detriment to ethnic Mexican workers laboring in the United States. Therefore, while working to incorporate ethnic Mexicans into U.S. unions, he also supported the AFL’s lobbying efforts to reduce the number of immigrants who entered each year.

#### *AFL’s Approach to Mexican Immigration*

Since World War I, AFL President Samuel Gompers had attempted to reduce Mexican immigration, lobbying against the exemptions granted to farmers after the 1917 Immigration Act, and supported placing Mexico under the quota system in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, all to no avail. Simultaneously, Gompers had been cultivating alliances with Mexican organized labor through the Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL). In 1918, Idar had played a central role organizing the PAFL’s first meeting in Laredo, Texas. Six years later, on December 6, 1924, he

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to Samuel Gompers, February 10, 1921, Box 3, Folder 9, CNIP.

accompanied Gompers to attend the inauguration of President Elías Calles' in Mexico City.<sup>86</sup> Gompers fell ill while in Mexico City, and died soon after.



Figure 6.1- Samuel Gompers presiding over a meeting of the Pan-American Federation of Labor in Mexico City. Seen just above his right shoulder is Clemente Idar. December 6, 1924.<sup>87</sup>

Gompers's death and the AFL's inability to win legislation to reduce immigration from Mexico, prompted a new approach. On April 21, 1925, Idar wrote William Green, Gompers' successor, recommending that the AFL work with the Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos (CROM) to address the problems Mexican immigration posed to the U.S. labor movement.<sup>88</sup> He advised that the AFL maintain their crucial relationship with Mexico's CROM, cultivating their relationship with Luis N. Morones. During the 1920s, Morones' star was rising within Mexican

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<sup>86</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, *Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico: A History of Their Relations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pub. Co, 1971), 110.

<sup>87</sup> The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Samuel Gompers addressing the Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL), 1924" New York Public Library Digital Collections accessed July 20, 2021. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6e96f711-dc68-8e9c-e040-e00a18066c69>.

<sup>88</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to William Green, April 21, 1925, Box 3 Folder 11, CNIP.

politics with his sights on the presidency of Mexico. Morones was the most influential member of CROM, which claimed a membership of 1.5 million. This was a clear exaggeration, but CROM was the country's largest and most powerful labor body.<sup>89</sup> Idar believed CROM could help organize workers in Mexico along its northern border. He wrote: "With a great organizing drive over that whole northern strip of Mexico's territory, we in due time, would be able to follow up that movement on the American side of the international boundary line." Second, he called on Green to push the AFL to more forcefully commit to organizing ethnic Mexicans and African Americans in order to swell union ranks. He estimated that there were, "nine million Negroes and two million Mexicans forming a total of eleven million" all with little to no contact with organized labor. He recommended that the AFL's Executive Committee take a more active role in promoting minority inclusion in unions. "The problem of organizing the Mexican and the Negro in the United States will never be solved until the executive officers ... take interest in it."<sup>90</sup>

Between 1925 and 1927, Green initiated a plan, seemingly influenced by Idar's recommendations, committing to transnational cooperation with CROM to reduce immigration. On August 27<sup>th</sup> 1925, Idar accompanied Green and other AFL leaders to a meeting with five representatives of Mexican labor in Washington D.C. (Figure 6.2).<sup>91</sup> In order to limit Mexican immigration to the United States, the parties agreed to pressure their governments to promote a "new principle of voluntary restraint" for a time being. They agreed to form a joint commission to study immigration and to urge workers who did cross the border to "immediately join the union of

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<sup>89</sup> Levenstein, *Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico*, 136.

<sup>90</sup> Correspondence from Clemente Idar to William Green, April 21, 1925, Box 3 Folder 11, CNIP.

<sup>91</sup> These five representatives from Mexico were: Luis N. Morones, Eduardo Moneda, Alberto Méndez, Canuto Vargas, and Roberto Haberman.

their trade in the country to which they go and abide faithfully by the laws and rules of the movement.” The AFL pledged to ensure Mexican workers were allowed to join in their affiliated unions.<sup>92</sup>



Figure 6.2- 1925 U.S.-Mexico Immigration Conference. Filmed August 27, 1925. Bottom (left to right): Mathew Woll, Chester M. Wright, Frank Morrison, Unknown, William Green, Luis N. Morones, Roberto Haberman. Top: (left to right): Clemente N. Idar, Edgar Wallace, Santiago Iglesias, Alberto Méndez, George H. Perkins, Eduardo Moneda (face unseen, bowing head behind Morones), unknown. Top solo: Canuto Vargas <sup>93</sup>

Looking back, the efficacy of this plan seems farfetched. It appeared as if an agreement had been reached to forge an immigration policy via labor unions, not legislation.<sup>94</sup> The hope of seeing these agreements implemented was dashed soon after the meeting. Historian Harvey Levenstein argues

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<sup>92</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Pan-American Federation of Labor, held in Mexico City, December 3-9, 1924*, 140. (Resolution 33); PAFL Conference, 36.

<sup>93</sup> Fox News Story A8994-A8996: Immigration conference--outtakes. Fox Movietone News Collection. Moving Image Research Collections. University of South Carolina.

<sup>94</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, “The AFL and Mexican Immigration in the 1920s: An Experiment in Labor Diplomacy,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (1968), 214.

that Morones never intended to implement voluntary restraint: “The closest he came to mentioning voluntary restraint was to say that CROM had always advised Mexican workers not to leave the country and would continue to do so.”<sup>95</sup> Levenstein implied that Morones entered into the agreement for political expediency and most likely would not have been able to fulfill it. Second, the PAFL failed to follow up on their agreement for two years, not meeting again until August 1927, during which time Morones was losing favor with President Calles in Mexico. Less than a year later, Álvaro Obregón, who had been re-elected for a second (non-consecutive term) as Mexican president, was assassinated. Despite evidence to the contrary, many suspected Morones as the mastermind behind the murder which doomed Morones and CROM. With Morones, CROM, and Obregón removed from the board, AFL leaders had few of their old allies in Mexico. Tellingly, at the 1928 AFL Conference, the Executive Council once again began to push for Mexican immigrant numbers to come under the quota system.<sup>96</sup>

In the spring of 1927, Idar learned that the south Texas Chamber of Commerce (STCC) was lobbying Secretary of Labor Davis to oppose the Box Bill because it would cut off their supply to low-wage labor. Idar wrote to labor leaders across the state to alert them that the STCC was lobbying politicians to oppose the Box Bill by claiming there were labor shortages in Texas.<sup>97</sup> Idar wanted to counteract this effort. But he was in a tricky position evident by the following statement he included in a letter to the President of the Texas State Federation of Labor:

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Mexican President Calles had been slowly trying to diminish the power of CROM in Mexican politics and Obregón’s assassination quickened Morones’ exile from power. Calles was leaving office, yet consolidating power behind the scenes ushering in a period known as the *Maximato*, when he would govern in all but name for the next six years. See, G. M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 103-106.

<sup>97</sup> Clemente N. Idar to C.F. Russi, 07 May 1927, Box 2, Folder 3, CNIP.

I address myself to you realizing that on account of my racial extraction I must not forfeit the respect and regard of the Mexican people, who would probably not understand the economic aspect of the question as far as we are concerned, and perhaps placing a different interpretation upon the whole question they might look upon me with contempt; and this, of course, is something that I wish to avoid for myself and my children. Nevertheless, I shall campaign as much as possible to arouse the interest of my fellow-trade-unionists in this state.<sup>98</sup>

For the next two years, Idar tried to counteract the power of agriculturalist's lobbying efforts. When he heard that three of LULAC's most prominent members were going before a congressional committee to testify against the Box Bill and that two of them served as representatives of their respective Chamber of Commerce associations, he could no longer hide his contempt.

On January 30, 1930, the day after Canales and Perales testified, Albert Johnson, chairman of the House Immigration Committee asked that a telegram to William Green, president of the AFL, from Idar, be entered into the record. The telegram stated:

As honorary president San Antonio Council League of United Latin American citizens, supported by M.C. Gonzales, general vice president of this same league throughout Texas, wish to inform you that any testimony that may be offered to-day or to-morrow before the House Immigration Committee by J.T. Canales, of Brownsville, Tex., member of our league, but employed by Southern Texas Growers; Ben Garza, president of the league; and Alonso S. Perales...honorary president of the league, is not official act of the league nor has it ever been discussed, indorsed [sic], or supported by the general membership or any division thereof.<sup>99</sup>

Idar claimed there were about twenty or more subordinate LULAC councils in Texas with members who were uninformed of "the activities of these gentlemen," and were unaware of "the hearings of the committee on the subject of immigration." Idar ended the telegram with a request,

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<sup>98</sup> Clemente N. Idar to George H. Slater, 16 April 1927, Box 6, Folder 2, CNIP.

<sup>99</sup> Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, 1930, 191.

“Please advise Mr. Perales at his home address [in Washington D.C.] of the full contents of this telegram, as we wish to make it a matter of record in the league”.<sup>100</sup>

Two months later, on March 30, 1930, Idar received a letter from LULAC’s general secretary, informing him he had been charged with misconduct in the organization for wiring the telegram to the House Committee “without authority from the League,” knowing that Perales was not only the Honorary President General of the League, but was its duly accredited representative in Washington.<sup>101</sup> LULAC officers concluded that Idar and González sent the telegram to “embarrass [sic] the good work intended [sic] to be done” by Perales and Canales.<sup>102</sup> The misconduct charges came with a set of instructions and a warning. To make amends, Idar and González were to pen letters of apology to Perales, Canales, and Garza, ask for corrections to the house committee’s report along with public *mea culpas* in local newspapers. They would be ousted from LULAC if they did not comply. The letter concluded, “[T]he next step will [be] entirely up to you to decide.”<sup>103</sup>

The charges against Idar and González had been made on February 16, 1930 at the LULAC general meeting in San Diego, Texas. There Canales questioned Idar’s loyalties accusing him of putting AFL interests over those of LULAC. Canales accused the AFL of being an organization

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> The letter from A. de Luna included a copy of the resolution dated March 02, 1930. They are separate letters in the archive. See, Correspondence from A. de Luna to C.N. Idar, 03 March 1930, Box 7 Folder 11, CNIP; Ben Garza, LULAC Resolution, 02 March 1930, Box 7 Folder 14, CNIP.

<sup>102</sup> Correspondence from A. de Luna to C.N. Idar, 03 March 1930, Box 7 Folder 11, CNIP.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

that viewed Mexicans as inferior and unassimilable. Both González and Idar were accused of being “unscrupulous henchmen” of the AFL and “traitors” to LULAC.<sup>104</sup>

Idar’s outrage and instincts compelled him to send the telegram opposing the representation of pro-business/anti-union LULAC leaders at the congressional committee on immigration. But embedded in the accusations were some truths. Of course Idar was committed to his lifelong employer the AFL. His actions stemmed from his experience as an organizer in Central Texas that made him a fierce opponent of large-scale growers and agriculturalists like Canales. He probably was more loyal to the AFL than to LULAC, but to accuse him of thinking that Mexicans were unassimilable and inferior was in direct conflict with his life’s work. He had spent the past decade organizing Mexicans (regardless of nationality) into labor unions and convincing AFL labor leaders to commit more time and resources to this untapped pool of potential union members. His commitment to ethnic Mexican workers was certainly distinct from that of Canales and Garza, who supported ethnic Mexican workers but also wanted a steady supply of them in low-wage industries in south Texas.

Perales, the third speaker at the congressional committee hearings on the Box Bill, was committed to combatting negative stereotypes used to discriminate against Mexicans as a whole. Therefore he must have been enraged by the telegram which LULAC officers charged was intended by Idar to embarrass Perales in front of the HCIN.

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<sup>104</sup> “Resolution, presented by J. T. Canales to the Supreme Council” Oliver Douglas Weeks Collection, LULAC Papers, LULAC Correspondence, minutes, resolutions, 1929-30, Box 1, Folder 6, page 1, LULAC Archives, Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin; Resume of Proceedings, 16 February 1930, San Diego, TX, Oliver Douglas Weeks Collection 1922-1932, Box 1, Folder 6, Page 3, Oliver Douglas Weeks Collection, LULAC Archives, Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin.

Idar undoubtedly handled the situation poorly. His previous letter in the Spring 1927 to the president of the Texas State Federation of Labor (see page 206 above) revealed his awareness that his views on the Box Bill were controversial amongst ethnic Mexican leaders. Also telling is a letter he wrote to Luis N. Morones, on November, 1930: “If the PAFL had intervened or participated in the matter [the Box Bill committee hearings], it is very possible that no word would ever have been said regarding the so-called ‘Box Bill’ that purported to exclude Mexicans from the privilege of entering our national territory. I am not alone in the thought that is stirring in the minds of many members of the labor movement that Mexico should consider the matter of wanting to place its immigrants in the category of Asians, as a studied insult.”<sup>105</sup> Idar clearly understood that the bill could be read by some as based on negative assumptions about Mexicans. Yet he also knew that unregulated Mexican immigration benefitted agriculturalists who wanted to maintain an exploitable, low wage workforce. In his view, this was why unchecked Mexican immigration threatened ethnic Mexican solidarity.

At the conclusion of the trial, González was acquitted; perhaps he agreed to make amends. Idar, on the other hand, was ousted from LULAC. Two years later, on May 3, 1932, he received a letter from M.C. González stating that a resolution had been adopted by the LULAC body to readmit Idar’s into LULAC and expunge his removal from LULAC. González noted that Canales had not been present and that only two members opposed the resolution: Robert Austin and Perales. González also let Idar know that Canales was going to be the next President of the League, and that it looked like LULAC would “again be controlled by both Canales and Perales.” He ended by

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<sup>105</sup> Correspondence from Clemente N. Idar to Luis N. Morones, 24 November 1930, Box 1, Folder 24, CNIP.

stating that the doors of the “San Antonio Council are open for you any time you care to come back and help us out.”<sup>106</sup>

LULAC did end up being controlled by Canales and Perales. The organization did not work with labor unions and worker organizations and instead focused on the segregation of children in public schools and Mexican American in public spaces. Mexican immigrants continued to work in the agricultural fields, like the ones Canales and Garza owned, for low wages.

By the time Idar received González’ letter, his health was beginning to fail. In April of 1933 he developed appendicitis and died on January 27, 1934.

#### *Conclusion of Box Bill*

The legacy of the Box Bill figures prominently in the institutional history of LULAC. Its official website includes a biographical essay on Perales stating: “His greatest task was the defeat of the ‘Box Immigration Bill’. This bill would have placed a quota on Mexican immigrants to the United States.... The bill failed to become law.”<sup>107</sup> This particular version of the story omits important details. The Box Bill was not defeated due to a groundswell of protest against its prejudicial nature that Perales brought up at the hearing. It was defeated by growers and business interests in the southwestern United States who made a good case that they could not continue to produce the country’s crops at a profit without the use of low-wage Mexican labor. A better interpretation of the Box Bill can be found in an interview with M.C. González, conducted in 1981, who expressed frustration over all the “fuss” that was made over this “*peccata minuta*” (not a big deal) that was the Box Bill affair. Both in tone and line of questioning, one can hear that the interviewer

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<sup>106</sup> Correspondence from M.C. González to Clemente N. Idar, 03 May 1932, Box 1 Folder 9, CNIP.

<sup>107</sup> “Alonso S. Perales,” League of United Latin American Citizens, accessed on February 1, 2020, [https://lulac.org/about/history/past\\_presidents/alonso\\_perales/](https://lulac.org/about/history/past_presidents/alonso_perales/).

considered González and Idar's actions as anti-LULAC and perhaps anti-Mexican actions. The interviewer pressed him on the issue, asking why he and Idar "undermined the group to send that telegram."<sup>108</sup> The tone of González' voice conveys frustration with the topic, eventually saying,

Some were representing the farmers who made their living by exploiting Mexican labor, whether they were born here or over there, other had other special interests... so that everybody had their own interest.<sup>109</sup>

To understand the specific actions of these men during the Immigration Committee Hearings in 1930 and their conflicts afterwards, it is necessary to examine their life work and varied experiences. Each one advancing their own interests, yet each had expended great effort throughout their lives to better the status of ethnic Mexican in the United States. J.T Canales and Ben Garza, pursuing their version of Mexican uplift by protecting the economy of south Texas; Perales, protecting the honor and reputation of the Mexican people; and Idar continued his effort to uplift the status of ethnic Mexican workers via union affiliation. The Box Bill Affair revealed not only the different views each person held, but also their different views for the future of ethnic Mexicans in the region. It was clear that Clemente's view had no place in LULAC's future.

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<sup>108</sup> Manuel C. González, "Talk with M.C. González re: LULAC," 07 June 1981, San Antonio, Box 1, Audio 2, Compact Disc, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Archives, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin, 43:00-minute mark.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

### **Conclusion: What Can We Learn from Failed Attempts at Solidarity**

This dissertation began with Clemente Vivero, a Catholic seminarian turned Mexican liberal, who found an outlet for his anticlericalism within a budding Protestant movement in late-nineteenth-century northern Mexico. It ended with Clemente N. Idar (named after his grandfather), a printer and journalist who, after World War I, channeled his protests against nativism and worker exploitation into a career organizing Mexican workers into labor unions for the American Federation of Labor. The two Clemente's bookend this history of three generations of activism conducted by members of the Idar family in the border region between 1880 and 1930. The Idar family attempted to create solidarity amongst a diverse, multi-national, cross-class Spanish-speaking border population in order to defend against prejudice and exploitation and advance the social, political, and economic interests of Mexican people. They used mutual-aid, fraternal, and volunteer associations, along with journalism, and later, labor organizations, to forge these bonds. Yet the Idar family's lofty goals never fully materialized and the organizations they created were short-lived. Theirs is mostly a history of failed attempts that provides valuable insights into the way in which transnational ideologies and institutions shaped the lives of Mexicans living in the border region and illuminates the vision progressive transborder activists held about their (never realized) "imagined community" in the Southwest.<sup>1</sup>

Three interrelated conclusions emerge from this history of failed attempts to unite and mobilize Mexicans and Mexican Americans within political, associational, and labor organizations. First, the family history of the Idars over three generations reveals a robust network of transnational Freemason and mutual-aid societies that protested different forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

entrenched power and worker exploitation during this period. The familial ties between Clemente Vivero and Nicasio Idar evidence how ideas flowed over time and space in the border region joining Mexico and the United States. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Vivero spent the majority of his adult life protesting the deep-seated power of the Catholic church. He was firmly rooted in Mexico's nineteenth-century liberal reform movement which included Freemasons, Protestant missionaries, and Catholic reformers who made northern Mexican railroad junctures a central zone of their organizing activity.<sup>2</sup> Within this reformist milieu Nicasio Idar's life intersected with Vivero's. In 1882, Idar married the latter's daughter, Jovita, after the two met at a Protestant gathering. During this time period, while working as a messenger on the Mexican National Railroad, Nicasio organized two railroad worker organizations considered proto-unions because of their independent and ephemeral characteristics.<sup>3</sup> They protested the fact that the railroad's managers reserved the best, most highly paid jobs, for U.S. foreign workers who monopolized the skilled trades. Nicasio's activism in the 1880s against the Catholic church was part of a larger liberal critique about the organization of corporations that also applied to U.S. owned Mexican railroads.

The ideological connections between Vivero and Idar also illustrate how Mexican reform movements easily traveled across borders and were adapted to new social and economic conditions. In the early 1900s, Nicasio moved to Laredo, Texas where he, along with his wife and eldest children, published two newspapers and became prominent members of border Freemason and *mutualista* associations that catered to Mexican and Mexican Americans. Nicasio

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 30-60.

<sup>3</sup> Marcelo N. Rodea, *Historia del movimiento obrero ferrocarrilero en México, 1890-1943* (México: [s.n.], 1944), 82.

continued to critique the power of the Catholic church but his cross-border work forced him to confront worker-capital power relations in twentieth-century Texas. By 1910, he and his family were protesting the segregation, exploitation, and lynching of Mexicans throughout the Lone Star state. In 1911, the family organized *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista*, the first state-wide alliance of Tejano progressives committed to fighting racism and prejudice against Mexicans. This Congress, like the Idar family's newspaper, produced no lasting influence. Yet the genealogy of their activism and expressions of reform reveal the interconnected nature of Mexican liberalism, Freemasonry, Protestantism, and anti-nativist activism in the border region.

Second, herein I argue that World War I had a profound effect on Mexican civic and labor organizations as a new cohort of leaders emerged in postwar Texas. Pre-war associations were often headed by middle-class Mexicans—journalists, teachers, petty bureaucrats, and skilled tradesmen—who were self-taught, labored in workshops, and most importantly, received money directly from the clients they served. They often held paternalistic views of low-wage Mexican workers, but nonetheless saw opportunity to advance the interests—economic, political, worker—of Mexican people as a whole in Texas by creating an (unequal) alliance with them. These elite Tejano progressives believed their future was tied to the prospects of the working class. This arrangement shifted during World War I as a middle class emerged in south Texas with distinct class interests. Members of this new class were largely professionals, educated in colleges, not self-taught. They worked at desks in offices, not in their homes or workshops. They received their paychecks for the work they did in courts, government offices, and local and state institutions.

This shift is exemplified in the generational distinction between the third eldest Idar, Eduardo, and his son, Ed. Jr. Eduardo learned the printing trade from his father, Nicasio, in the

family's backyard, make-shift workshop.<sup>4</sup> His son, Ed. Jr., also sought a career in newspapers, yet his education did not come through apprenticeship. Ed Jr. attended the University of Texas where he majored in journalism. He later received a law degree eventually serving as a member of the American G.I. Forum, a civil rights organization centered on helping Mexican veterans secure benefits owed to them through the G.I. Bill. Ed Jr. experienced a different path than his father. Such Tejano professionals directed their activity towards middle class concerns — encouraging economic vitality in the region, protesting segregation in public schools and juries, and demanding their voting rights as American citizens. Such concerns were distinct from the goals of the earlier generation of activists who were more closely tied to economically uplifting the working-class Mexicans in the region. This shift mirrored similar changes within African American civil rights movements, as a new generation of activists envisioned distinct ways of fighting Jim Crow in the U.S. South.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, this dissertation posits that there was a brief moment in U.S.-Mexican labor relations when the largest labor confederations in the two countries were uniquely positioned to create a transnational labor movement. Clemente Idar was heavily involved in trying to forge these bonds of solidarity between workers on both sides of the border. He organized Mexican and Mexican American workers into unions associated with the American Federation of Labor, translated documents into Spanish for the organization as a whole, and served as an interlocutor

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Orozco, "Idar, Eduardo," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/idar-eduardo>. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>5</sup> This argument is greatly influenced by Risa L. Goluboff's work on African American civil rights and her argument that civil rights lawyers shifted away from addressing worker concerns after the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954. See Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

between labor organizations in Mexico and the United States. As I argued in Chapter Six, there are plenty of reasons to doubt the sincerity of labor leaders such as Samuel Gompers, William Green, and Luis N. Morones about their commitments to transnational labor solidarity. However, organizers on the ground had a different perspective. From the ground up, organizers like Clemente Idar and Canuto Vargas, viewed transnational organizations, not as an egalitarian pipedream, but as a necessity. They believed organizing in the U.S. Southwest necessitated creating mutually beneficial agreements with Mexican unions. The AFL-CROM alliance of the 1920s never materialized into the pact envisioned by people like Idar and Vargas. But it revealed a more dynamic, perhaps even more inclusive, labor movement that existed at the ground level within less-studied areas like the U.S. Southwest.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the study of this multi-generational family binds together seemingly disparate peoples, movements, and ideas into a cohesive narrative that reveals the interconnected nature of Mexican and U.S. experiences with modernity, liberalism, and democracy. Far from being passive actors, the Idars attempted to articulate a new mode of existing at the border of social, religious, and national movements which necessitated critiquing and reforming existing power structures in Mexico and the U.S. Their ambitions often depended on the lofty goal of creating

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Anne Montes argued that while racism and prejudice persisted in AFL unions, Black and Mexican American dockworkers in Houston, associated with the International Longshoreman of America (AFL), “made the union their own and used it to anti-racist ends.” Her work joins a growing body of scholarship which finds the seeds of civil rights activism within union activity. See, Rebecca Anne Montes, “Working for American Rights: Black, White, and Mexican American Dockworkers in Texas During the Great Depression” (Dissertation, Austin, University of Texas, 2005), 13-14; Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2016); Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

solidarity between Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the border region. This turned out to be more aspirational than achievable, their vision for the future was contingent on a Mexican solidarity that never materialized. But by reconstructing that vision, we better understand not only the *realpolitik* of their goals, but also the limits of their imagination for a more equal, democratic border region—an imagination that is perhaps more dynamic than is often credited. Understanding the bounds of their imaginaries not only allows us to see the possibilities people in the past envisioned, but can also push us, in the present, to conceive of new forms of solidarity and belonging in the twenty first century.

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