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SOME SUGGESTIVE PROBLEMS IN THE AMERICANIZATION OF MEXICANS

By ROY E. DICKERSON, General Secretary, Y. M. C. A., Tucson, Ariz.

When mention is made of the problems confronting the nation by reason of the presence of foreigners within our gates, the average American is accustomed to think at once about the heterogeneous mass of immigrants who come to us from the nations of Europe and Asia, but without accurate knowledge of that part of our country which borders upon Mexico, he is scarcely likely to give even passing thought to the Mexican immigrants, much less to appreciate how large and difficult a part of our Americanization problem these people constitute.

This failure in popular thought to include the Mexican among the immigrants may be due to the fact that comparatively few people have occasion to observe this class of immigrants, since the overwhelming majority of Mexicans who come to this country distribute themselves in those states along The International Boundary, known generally as the Great South West. The United States census for 1910 shows that nine-tenths of the then Mexican population was concentrated in the states of Arizona, Texas, California, and New Mexico. This limited distribution in itself gives rise to many problems which would not exist were these people more widely scattered and, in turn, accounts for the lack of understanding on the part of the ordinary citizen of any special needs or difficulties among the Mexicans. While the 1910 census places the Mexican population within the United States at some two hundred and twenty-five thousand, and subsequent figures give the number of immigrants between 1911 and 1917 as one hundred and eighteen thousand, it is felt by those informed on the subject that these figures do not represent accurately the Mexican population, and that instead of the three or four hundred thousand indicated by these reports the number of Mexicans in the Southwest alone must be at least twice that much.

However inaccurate such estimates may be, it is certain that the Mexican population this side of and along the International Boundary is larger than the population on the other side. In El Paso alone it is conservatively estimated that not less than fifty per cent of its eighty-five thousand inhabitants

is Mexican. Such an estimate discloses a larger Mexican population in El Paso than in any city—American or Mexican—along the boundary excepting Monterey, Chihuahua itself, a purely Mexican city, having only a population of some thirty-five thousand. What is true of El Paso no doubt is also true of many other communities in the southwest of which the writer cannot speak authoritatively. His knowledge of conditions in one of the border cities is sufficient to enable him to venture some specific statements. These are derived from a survey of the 'teen-age boy-life of Tucson, Arizona, undertaken by the Young Men's Christian Association of that city, some details of which will be set forth in this paper.

Tucson is a city of some twenty-five thousand population, located about seventy-five miles north of the International Boundary, and on the main line of the Southern Pacific of Mexico Railroad. It is a modern, progressive and well-built city entirely American in spirit. Probably about fifty per cent of the population is Mexican. The presence of the proportionately large number of Mexican boys in the community indicated the need of a careful study of some of the sociological conditions among them before a program could be developed by the Association with any degree of confidence that it would be adapted to the needs of this class of boys. Accordingly the Young Men's Christian Association undertook to bring out by a survey the facts concerning the number of 'teen-age boys in the community, their nationality, the number in school and at work, the education of the working boy, and the nature of his work together with the amount of his earnings and something of his home conditions. The data for the survey were drawn chiefly from the school census made in the spring of 1918, supplemented by material from other sources and, in many instances, by special inquiry. Without going into details as to the technique of the survey, it will be sufficient to say that it is felt that the results accurately disclose the situation with respect to any of the matters inquired into. Before proceeding it must be noted that this article deals with the problems of only a portion of the Mexican population. Considerable numbers of this race are already well Americanized and are represented by many able, cultured and much respected men and women in all walks of life. What follows has no reference to them nor to any of the towns or cities in the country where long residence has brought about, as a whole, a domination of American habits and customs among the Mexican residents.

With regard to nationality, the survey disclosed the interesting fact that about sixty-two per cent of all the boys of

teen age were of Mexican birth, and that at any one of the ages investigated the number of Mexican boys considerably exceeded the number of American boys of the same age. This ratio between the children of the two races is not uncharacteristic of other communities, no doubt due to the fact that the Mexican family, as compared with the American family, is much larger in size. In El Paso nearly seventy per cent of

the scholastic population of that city is said to be Mexican, and the school census of Tucson, as a whole, shows that about fifty-five per cent is of Mexican descent. It is interesting, in this connection, to note that in the year 1918 every sixth immigrant to the United States was a Mexican, and that nearly three thousand boys under sixteen years of age were admitted in that year, being the largest group of any one nationality.

One of the most significant conditions disclosed by the survey was the relationship of these boys to the educational institutions of the city, both public and private. Taking the group as a whole, it was found that there was practically no difference between the number of Mexican boys of 'teen age in school and those of American extraction, though only forty-five per cent of the total boy population was in school; but upon analyzing the school attendance by years, it was discovered that this apparent equality in attendance at school was because of the large number enrolled at the ages of thirteen and fourteen. On a percentage basis the condition is shown by the following chart on which the solid line represents American boys and the dotted line Mexican boys.

It will be observed that the percentage of Mexican boys in school steadily and rapidly declines from ninety-two and six-tenths per cent at age thirteen to sixty-five per cent at age fifteen, following which there is a sheer drop of nearly forty-five per cent to twenty and three-tenths per cent at age sixteen. In interpretation of this it should be said that the laws of Arizona require the attendance of children at school until they are sixteen years of age unless the child has completed the elementary school before that age, in which event he may leave at fourteen. As a rule the Mexican boy is much retarded and few, if any, complete the eighth grade before sixteen years of age. When the pressure of the law is removed at sixteen years of age the result is graphically indicated by the dotted line. Leaving aside for the present any consideration of other factors contributing to this situation, the fact that less than twenty per cent of the boys of the upper 'teen age were in school is a serious matter from any point of view. Americans as a whole seem only recently to be anything like awakened to the importance of education as an Americanizing influence on any foreign people. When, as in this case, foreigners come to this country and establish settlements which are virtually small sections of foreign communities, speaking their own language, retaining their own customs, reading their own papers and to all intents and purposes maintaining their national life even in the midst of American forces and influences, the chief agency for bringing about an assimilation of such people must be American educational institutions, and, when we find more than eighty per cent of the boys of any foreign nationality outside of the sphere of influence of our schools, the situation becomes a matter of grave concern.

Another aspect of the same problem is illustrated by the following chart showing the highest grade in school completed by one hundred and seventeen Mexican working boys and repre-

sending an accurate cross-section of the whole number of Mexican boys at work. The figures at the left indicate numbers, while those at the top represent grades.

HIGHEST GRADE IN SCHOOL COMPLETED BY 117 WORKING BOYS

This chart considers only numbers without distinctions of age. A supplementary chart, not shown here, analyzed the figures by ages. Taken together they disclosed that three of the group studied—two of them nineteen years old and one eighteen years old—had never gone to school at all. Sixteen boys had completed the third grade, part of them having received their education in Mexico. This group was distributed as follows: one, nineteen years old; six, eighteen years old—three of

whom had passed through the third grade in Mexico; three, seventeen years old; two, sixteen; three, fifteen and one, fourteen. As further illustrating this chart, consider the nineteen boys who had completed only the fifth grade. Of these one was nineteen years old and the balance were distributed as follows: six, age eighteen; two, age seventeen; three, age sixteen; two, age fifteen; four, age fourteen and one age thirteen. The median line on this chart will run somewhere between the fifth and sixth grade, thus corroborating the judgment of those familiar with conditions elsewhere, who estimate that Mexican boys generally quit school at the fifth grade.

Further information on this subject is given by the educational survey of Arizona made by the United States Bureau of Education in 1916-1917, and published as Bulletin 1917 #44. At page 120 of the Bulletin a table is given showing the number of children enrolled in each grade for every one hundred enrolled in the first grade in eleven of the principal cities of Arizona. A part of the data given is shown below:

	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3d Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
Average of State	100	52	46	43	35	23	22	19
Average for Tucson	100	46	36	40	23	15	15	11
Average for 30 other cities	100	88	77	75	70	63	52	43

When studying this table the rapidly shifting population in Arizona together with the large numbers of Mexican boys dropping out of school must be considered since these two factors undoubtedly largely account for the low averages shown. Excessive retardation of Mexican children is also an important contributing cause. It is not uncommon to find boys of five or six years difference in age in the same grade, and the graded schools have many Mexican boys fifteen or sixteen years old in the same classes as American boys five or six years younger. The median variation disclosed by the government survey for twelve cities in Arizona ran from four years at the eighth grade to eight and one-half years at the first grade, it appearing entirely possible to find thirteen, fourteen, fifteen or sixteen-year-old Mexican children in the same grade as five- and six-year-old American children. Figures from the same source for this city show an average of twenty-seven per cent of children in the grades as three years or more

over age. The report itself says, "The over-age problem is greatest in the fifth grade and rapidly diminishes in the upper grades and high school. This is about the grade at which retarded children reach the compulsory age limit and drop out of school." No doubt this is one of the most potent reasons for such a decrease in attendance as shown by the first chart. As a whole the Mexican boy matures more rapidly than American boys and feels himself much out of sympathy with his younger classmates. Naturally enough the tendency is to leave, as soon as the law will permit, the school which thrusts him into such company. Before passing on to other features it should be noted that the figures given as the "average for 30 other cities" are derived from data collected outside of the State of Arizona and are given in the government bulletin to illustrate conditions in other places where immigrants do not enter into the situation. The figures for Tucson are lower than the average for the State partly because of the relatively larger number of Mexicans in that city as compared with other cities in the State.

Among other noteworthy factors are to be included economic pressure which makes it necessary for the boy to leave school and, in many instances, a real lack of stimulation from the home and other forces. Apparently neither the social heredity, the environment nor the influence of the home is sufficient to stimulate the boy to remain in school in anything like the same numbers as the American boy and, perhaps, herein lies the heart of the problem, the real task being that of creating or utilizing influences designed to evoke a greater response to educational opportunities. No doubt there are large numbers of Mexican boys who leave school for no sufficient cause and who might well continue their education if the home or other social agencies urged and encouraged them to do so, provided the school offers a curriculum adapted to their special needs.

Two other aspects from the sociological point of view remain to be mentioned. The surveys show an interesting and unexpected range of earning on the part of the working boy, running from thirty dollars a month at one extreme to one hundred and eighty dollars at the other. The overwhelming majority of boys working were earning between sixty dollars and one hundred and ten dollars per month while quite a few were making between one hundred and ten dollars and one hundred and eighty dollars a month. It probably is true that the range of wages for boys at the time this survey was made reflected the abnormally high scales maintained during the war and that a similar inquiry made at the present time would show a somewhat lower average, yet even if such prove to be the fact

the situation would be little if any the less interesting and full of social problems, especially when considered in connection with the just discussed educational background of these boys and the home conditions as disclosed by the investigation.

We have already mentioned the well-known tendency of the Mexican along with other foreign nationalities to establish settlements in this country in which the customs and habits of living prevalent in the home country are perpetuated. It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt discussion of the type of home maintained by the Mexican either in his native country or in the United States. It will be sufficient to say that as a rule immigrants congregate in small areas, densely settled, with more or less primitive habits of living and in an atmosphere almost wholly devoid of American influences. Illiteracy is widespread and a very large percentage are not able to speak or even to understand the English language. In addition to this general condition the survey disclosed that nineteen per cent of all the boys of 'teen age reported their fathers as being dead; six and one-half per cent made a similar report with respect to their mothers and three and four-tenths per cent were shown to be living away from home, making a total of twenty-eight and nine-tenths per cent of the boys at this most important age whose home life was, in a very vital respect, abnormal

Some conception of the problems presented will be gained when one considers the situation as a whole, taking as typical of many of the entire group, some of the results disclosed in the survey. Here we have a community comprising a large part of the city in which it is situated, maintaining very largely the habits and customs of life in Mexico, speaking their own language, reading their own papers and unable, to a large extent, to understand or to speak English. In this community are considerable numbers of boys whose education has not gone beyond that of the fifth grade, eighty per cent of whom are not in school, large numbers of them earning much more money than is wholesome for any boy of 'teen age to have at his disposal, and living in homes frequently lacking the presence of either father or mother. In this connection also should be considered something of the racial and social characteristics of these people. They represent a race which long has been held under the pressure of conquest and political despotism. The boy reflects this pressure in his diffidence, by an inclination to be more retiring than the American boy, and in a temperamental lack of the buoyancy and optimism of our own youth. We are told by those familiar with national life in Mexico, that the play-life of the boy is very meagre.

There is an abundance of individual games but a great deficiency of those requiring team work and, as a whole, the Mexican boy considers himself too old to play when he has reached the age of sixteen. Such a boy has no fraternities, no sports, no visions, of social service, no one of the many activities which gain the interest and attention of the American youth—in short, he suffers from a paucity of things to do. The revolutions of recent years have driven many Mexicans of the finest class into this country, and these refugees constitute almost a separate problem in themselves. They have suddenly come out from an environment and a national life very different from our own into conditions far from favorable, in many instances, and find themselves completely at sea. Illustrative of this may be mentioned the cases of two boys now in this country, one of them formerly a student of law in Mexico, now unable to pursue his studies and serving as a janitor; the other formerly a student of medicine, now reduced to the necessity of working as a messenger boy. As this is being written an Associated Press Dispatch tells of a former rich and distinguished Mexican, one-time member of the Mexican Cabinet and a wearer of the French Legion of Honor, who for two years past has been making his living in a border city driving a "jitney bus."

Over against these limitations should be considered some of the characteristics as we have had occasion to observe them among the boys in this city. There is an unusual eagerness and desire for self-development—almost any opportunity that promises helpfulness is eagerly seized upon. There is a great deal of respect for authority and achievement which makes Mexican boys as a whole better disciplined and more readily controlled than the American boy. In addition there is a tremendous pride and sensitiveness which, unless understood and reckoned with, alienates the sympathy of the boy, quite imperceptibly at times, but very effectively.

Such are some of the aspects of this large problem. The whirligig of revolution has accentuated many of its phases and, at the same time, has opened to this country a rare opportunity by bringing within our boundaries and within reach of our schools and other Americanizing forces many boys of the finest families in Mexico now numbered among the refugees here, but who are refugees only, being on fire with love and enthusiasm for their own country. To it the overwhelming majority of them will return and because of their former position and superior education they will become in time the dominating and controlling minds in that country. If we are to have better international understanding of a permanent

nature between ourselves and this near neighbor in the south, we must take care that these boys and young men carry back with them an accurate conception of our spirit and that they shall have made that spirit an integral part of their own. And if we are to cope successfully with the Americanization of the large numbers who still remain in this country, the best efforts of our best citizenship must be given to these problems in a much more vigorous and effective way than has hitherto been manifested.