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Mass Eviction To Mexico In 1930s Spurs Apology

Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee, December 28, 2005

Carlos Guerra was only 3 years old when Los Angeles County authorities came to his family's house in Azusa and ordered his mother, a legal United States resident, and her six American-born children to leave the country.

It was 1931. The administration of President Herbert Hoover backed a policy that would repatriate hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans, more than half of them United States citizens.

Amid the economic desperation of the Depression, Latino families were viewed as taking jobs and government benefits from "real Americans." In Los Angeles County, a Citizens Committee for Coordination for Unemployment Relief urgently warned of 400,000 "deportable aliens," declaring: "We need their jobs for needy citizens."

Up to 2 million people of Mexican ancestry were relocated to Mexico during the 1930s, even though as many as 1.2 million were born in the United States. In California, some 400,000 Latino United States citizens or legal residents were forced to leave.

Now California, for its part, wants to say it is sorry.

On Sunday, Senate Bill 670 — the so-called "Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program" — becomes official. It acknowledges the suffering of tens of thousands of Latino families unjustly forced out of the Golden State that was their home.

"The state of California apologizes . . . for the fundamental violations of their basic civil liberties and constitutional rights during the period of illegal deportation and coerced emigration," the act reads.

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California's apology was inspired by the work of California State University, Los Angeles, Chicano studies professor Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, a history professor emeritus at Long Beach City College.

In their book, "Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s," they describe long-term emotional trauma by children, born in the United States, who were forced to grow up in Mexico.

"For American-born children, trying to adjust to life in Mexico proved to be a very traumatic experience," the authors wrote. ". . . Deep-seated scars of rejections by both cultures would remain embedded in their lives forever."

The little-acknowledged history of Mexican Americans repatriated in the 1930s became embedded in the mind of state Sen. Joe Dunn, D-Santa Ana, after he read "Decade of Betrayal" on a flight to Washington, D.C.

Dunn drafted SB 670 with the help of Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, D-Los Angeles, and Assembly members Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys and Lori Saldaña, D-San Diego.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the bill Oct. 7, but vetoed a companion measure — Senate Bill 645 — that would have created a commission to study paying reparations to survivors of the 1930s repatriations.

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