

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Deportee: The Missing Mexicans

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*'The crops are all in, the peaches are rotting,  
The oranges are all packed in their creosote dumps.  
They're flying them back to the Mexican border,  
so they can pay all their money to wade back again.  
Goodbye to my Juan, farewell Rosalita,  
adios mes amigos, Jesus y Maria.  
You won't have a name when you ride the big airplane,  
all they will call you is ... deportee.'*

-- 'Deportee' or 'Plane Wreck at Los Gatos,' by Woody Guthrie

Recent news media coverage about the impending deportation of “illegal aliens” from Mexico and elsewhere who have allegedly overfilled our country raises several interesting socio-economic questions. How will the United States economy respond when and if hundreds of thousands of people who have integrated themselves into the domestic workforce suddenly disappear? More specifically, what will happen to already price-inflated food prices when there are far fewer workers to plant, cultivate, and harvest? This seemingly esoteric and geographically remote question has local implications. Regional landscaping, as well as crop management, are more dependent upon itinerant labor than may

seem apparent. And much of this work is being done by workers who immigrated to the country illegally.

Perhaps some answers could be extracted from history, including events from Erie's bayfront neighborhood. In addition to the large and well-established Italian and Portuguese communities that were embedded in the lower westside, there were dozens of additional ethnic people, including a diverse pocket of immigrants who had come to the United States both before and after World War II. That interesting enclave lived at the western end of West Second Street in a series of connected, dumpy, and bedraggled buildings that stretched north to Front Street and the bluffs overlooking Presque Isle Bay.

There were more than 25 people crowded into the rundown, old dwellings that inhabited the western end of the block. Several individual rental units on that end of West Second Street housed multiple families; crowded together and sharing tiny bathrooms.



*This 1931 scene features a crowd waving goodbye to a trainload of Mexicans who were being repatriated (deported) from Los Angeles. (New York News image)*

Other neighbors, many of whom were first- or second-generation immigrants, disparagingly referred to these micro community people as DPs and their depressed housing as “DP-Land.” Clearly, it was a case of slightly less recent immigrants “picking on” new arrivals and calling them “displaced persons.” The people in that community were my paper route customers, but they shared a single paper. As they apologetically explained to me, they needed the newspaper to find jobs but could not afford more than one.

Those people were wonderful to me, often feeding me when I was delivering their paper and always preparing a large and delicious gift box of treats at Christmas time. We chatted often, and they regaled me with stories of how their community worked. New immigrants arrived, joined their welcoming living compound, worked hard to get organized and grounded, and then left to move into better places. When I asked about their countries of origin, they all seemed to be Europeans, but that had not always been the case.

They told me that there had been Mexican people living in the compound but that they had all “disappeared” during the 1930s and 1940s. Before the war. Pennsylvania immigration records support this recollection. There were increasing numbers of Mexicans in Erie County until that ethnic population suddenly crashed, essentially disappearing between 1930 and 1950. In recent years, Erie city and county have experienced a resurgence of Mexican people, but that population is just now recovering from its earlier collapse.

As of 2024, immigrants made up 4.2% of Erie County residents and 6.1% of the city of Erie’s residents. Of that city total, 7.3% or 890 people are of Mexican descent. Mexican people currently make up the second-largest immigrant community. For critics of the contributions of immigrants, it should be noted that local immigrants are more likely to own businesses (9.7% versus 7.6% of native-born citizens); graduate from college (30% versus 27% of native-born citizens) and hold advanced or professional degrees (16% versus 9% of native-born citizens). While national statistics suggest that about 40% of Mexican immigrants live in the U.S. illegally, that average is probably higher than current local totals, and there is no way to verify the numbers, according to the Pugh Foundation.

The sudden pre-war collapse of the local Mexican population was part of a mass deportation plan that began during the Great Depression. The largest number of “repatriations” took place between 1929 and 1933 and were part of President Herbert Hoover’s plan to save the United States economy from chaos. Hoover blamed Mexicans for the depression that was descending upon the nation. In his 1930 inaugural address, he promised to solve America’s unemployment problem by “removing” the Mexicans who were allegedly stealing jobs from citizens. Historian Abraham Hoffman estimates that more than 400,000 Mexicans (mostly citizens) left the U.S. between 1929 and 1937, with a peak of 138,000 in 1931. Mexican government sources say more than 300,000 were repatriated between 1930 and 1933, while Mexican media reported up to 2 million during the same span. Official records were not well-maintained.

The Mexican government accelerated the flow for a few years by offering cash bonuses and free land to former citizens who would return. Mexican government officials hoped to capitalize on the agricultural and industrial expertise that had been absorbed by nationals who had spent time in the United States. They also felt some responsibility to Mexican Americans who were living in territories that

had once been part of Mexico. Texas, for example, had been a Mexican territory until 1845.

As might have been predicted, a large number of Mexican deportees were extracted from the southwestern states with California, Texas, and Arizona leading the statistical total. But there were thousands of Mexicans in northern and eastern states, as well, including Pennsylvania. In Johnstown and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, just before the Great Depression, Mexicans made up an estimated 20% of the steelmaking and coalmining workforces.

As President Hoover continued to scapegoat Mexicans for causing the Depression, several despicable anti-Mexican news articles appeared in popular media. Perhaps the most racist and nasty was a Saturday Evening Post series vilifying Mexican people for almost all of America's problems. Many Mexican people happily returned to their own country after suffering the double blow of unemployment as well as the racist backlash that grew during the 1930s.

Deportation and repatriation continued into the 1940s but ground to a halt during the war years when there was a sudden labor shortage. Mexicans returned in force, working both in agriculture as well as industry and mining, while taking the place of men who had departed for the war. Many Mexican immigrants also volunteered for the military during World War II and served with distinction. More than 300,000 served in the military with 17 earning the Medal of Honor and 140 the Distinguished Service Cross.

When the war ended, however, and competition for jobs increased, there was a return to anti-Mexican sentiments. Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a rebound in deportation, culminating in "Operation Wetback," a disgustingly named federal program designed to remove Mexicans, particularly from the southwestern states. It was during this era that American folksinger Woodie Guthrie wrote his now-famous song, "Deportee." For 20 years, frenzied American officials rounded up Mexicans, loaded them on busses, trains, and airplanes, and took them to Mexico.



*Typical Mexican roundup*

In 1948, an airplane carrying Mexicans being flown back to Mexico crashed in California's Los Gatos Valley, killing everyone onboard. Guthrie was angered when newspaper coverage of the tragedy listed only the names of the Americans who had been aboard — the pilot, copilot, and security guard. Instead of including the names of the Mexicans who died, news coverage simply referred to them as "deportees." The song was made famous by Pete Seeger, who began performing it a decade later and it has since become a folk anthem. Joan Baez chose it upon her induction into The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.



*Joan Baez, whose Stanford Ph.D. father was born in Mexico, sings "Deportee" during her induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2017.*

In a bit of irony, the West Second Street corner, which once housed an enclave of Erie's poorest people, mostly recent immigrants, has been transformed. Developers eventually noticed that this section of the bayfront was blessed with stunning views of Presque Isle Bay and began to acquire and rebuild the dumpy buildings.



*First, the three original bedraggled buildings were transformed.*



*Then the house next door was remodeled and added to the new compound.*



*And finally, a third project resulted in this “luxury townhouse” building, squeezed onto a former skinny lot where 1950s “DP’s” grew vegetables.*

Gentrification has exploded along the Bluffs, overlooking Presque Isle Bay. The new buildings, condos, and apartments are beautiful, but I miss the lovely immigrant community that used to share a single newspaper so that they could save money while looking for jobs.

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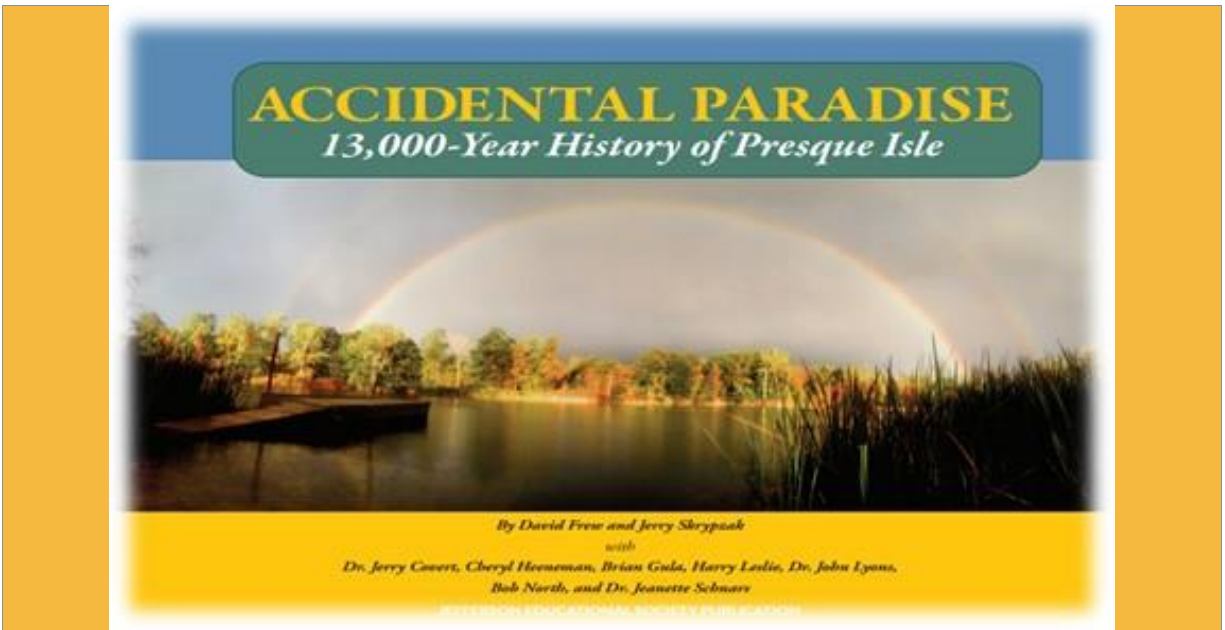
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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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