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# Mass Deportation May Sound Unlikely, But It's Happened Before

Adrian Florido September 08, 2015 4:35 AM ET

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Presidential candidate Donald Trump's proposal to deport all 11 million immigrants living in the country illegally, along with their U.S.-born children, sounds far-fetched. But something similar happened before.

During the 1930s and into the 1940s, up to 2 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were deported or expelled from cities and towns across the U.S. and shipped to Mexico. According to some estimates, more than half of these people were U.S. citizens, born in the United States.

It's a largely forgotten chapter in history that Francisco Balderrama, a California State University historian, documented in [Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s](#). He co-wrote that book with the late historian Raymond Rodriguez.

"There was a perception in the United States that Mexicans are Mexicans," Balderrama said. "Whether they were American citizens, or whether they were Mexican nationals, in the American mind — that is, in the mind of government officials, in the mind of industry leaders — they're all Mexicans. So ship them home."

It was the Great Depression, when up to a quarter of Americans were unemployed and many believed that Mexicans were taking scarce jobs. In response, federal, state and local officials launched so-called "repatriation" campaigns. They held raids in workplaces and in public places, rounded up Mexicans and Mexican-Americans alike, and deported them. The most famous of these was in downtown Los Angeles' Placita Olvera in 1931.

A memorial in downtown Los Angeles commemorates the mass expulsion of Mexican-Americans during the Great Depression.

Balderrama says these raids were intended to spread fear throughout Mexican barrios and pressure Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to leave on their own. In many cases, they succeeded.

Where they didn't, government officials often used coercion to get rid of Mexican-Americans who were U.S. citizens. In Los Angeles, it was standard practice for county social workers to tell those receiving public assistance that they would lose it, and that they would be better off in Mexico. Those social workers would then get tickets for families to travel to Mexico. According to Balderrama's research, one-third of LA's Mexican population was expelled between 1929 and 1944 as a result of these practices.

That's what happened to Emilia Castañeda and her family.

Castañeda was born in Los Angeles in 1926 to immigrant parents. Her mother died while she was growing up, and her father struggled to get work during the Depression. When Castañeda was nine, Los Angeles County paid to put the family on a southbound train to Mexico. They lived with relatives, but often had to sleep outdoors for lack of space.

"The oldest of the boys, he used to call me a *repatriada*," Castañeda remembered in a 1971 interview, using the Spanish word for a repatriate. "And I don't think I felt that I was a *repatriada*, because I was an American citizen." Castañeda didn't return to the U.S. until she was 17, by which point she had lost much of her English. Her father never returned.

In the mid 1930s, when Esteban Torres was 3, his father was rounded up and deported to Mexico while working at a mine in Arizona. Torres, who would become a U.S. congressman, never saw his father again.

Balderrama says these family separations remain a lasting legacy of the mass deportations of that era. Despite claims by officials at the time that deporting U.S.-born children — along with their immigrant parents — would keep families together, many families were destroyed.

Esteban Torres was a toddler when his father, a Mexican immigrant, was caught up in a workplace roundup at an Arizona copper mine in the mid-1930s. "My mother, like other wives, waited for the husbands to come home from the mine. But he didn't come home," Torres recalled in a recent interview. He now lives east of Los Angeles. "I was 3 years old. My brother was 2 years old. And we never saw my father again."

Torres' mother suspected that his father had been targeted because of his efforts to organize miners. That led Esteban Torres to a lifelong involvement with organized labor. He was eventually elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and served there from 1983 to 1999.

Today, Torres serves on the board of [La Plaza de Cultura y Artes](#) in Los Angeles, a Mexican-American cultural center. In front of it stands a memorial that the state of California dedicated in 2012, apologizing to the hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens who were illegally deported or expelled during the Depression.

"It was a sorrowful step that this country took," Torres said. "It was a mistake. And for Trump to suggest that we should do it again is ludicrous, stupid and incomprehensible."