"Are We Not Foreigners Here?"

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Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Schulze, Jeffrey.
"Are We Not Foreigners Here?": Indigenous Nationalism in the Twentieth-Century U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

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The White Man Came and Pretty Soon They Were All around Us

Yaqui, Kickapoo, and Tohono O'odham Migrations

The people came out of the earth somewhere in the east. There they spent the first night; and the chief said to them, “In the morning we will divide into many groups, so we can occupy the entire earth. Some of you will go to the sea, and others to the north and the west.” . . . So in the morning they divided as the chief had instructed, and set out. All over the country they traveled.
—Papago migration legend, 1919

In the waning years of the Yaquis’ late nineteenth-century bid for independence from Mexico, the Los Angeles–based journalist John Kenneth Turner traveled to Mexico to investigate the tribe's fate. The Yaquis had reportedly become targets of a sweeping government-sponsored relocation campaign, courtesy of Mexico’s president/dictator, Porfirio Díaz, which government officials hoped would once and for all end the group’s long history of violent resistance to Mexican authority. The deportees’ destination, according to available accounts, was Yucatán, which many Mexican political refugees often likened to Russia’s Siberia. “Siberia,” one told Turner, “is hell frozen over; Yucatan is hell aflame.”¹ The government sent the Yaquis to labor in essentially slave-like conditions on plantations that produced henequen, an agave plant grown extensively in southern Mexico whose fibers can be used to produce rope, twine, coarse fabrics, and alcohol.

In order to gain access to the closely guarded plantations of the “henequen kings,” Turner played the part of a wealthy American investor, complete with interpreter in tow. The ruse worked. His imaginary fortune served as an “open sesame to their clubs, and to their farms.” He was able to observe thousands of Indian “slaves” laboring under everyday conditions, while he slowly but surely won the confidence of the planters. Soon, they began supplying Turner with what he must have considered journalistic gold. For instance, Turner noted that although the planters referred to their
system of labor as “peonage,” or enforced service for debt, and to their chattel as “people” or “laborers” in public, privately they did not mince words, admitting that they were, in fact, slaveholders. They freely spoke of employing corporal punishment on uncooperative field hands on a regular basis, and viewed their workers as little more than commodities. In fact, one planter offered to sell Turner “a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, or a thousand of any of them, to do with them exactly as I wished.” Turner also learned that these powerful planters had similarly powerful friends. Local police, public prosecutors, and judges could all be counted on to protect this enterprise. Finally, the planters insisted that slavery was actually quite common in Mexico. “Slaves are not only used on the henequen plantations,” Turner learned, “but in the city, as personal servants, as laborers, as household drudges, as prostitutes.” In explaining his particular interest in the Yaquis given such widespread abuse, Turner stated, “The Yaquis are exiles. They are dying in a strange land, they are dying faster, and they are dying alone, away from their families.” He concluded, “I went to Yucatan in order to witness, if possible, the final act in the life drama of the Yaqui nation. And I witnessed it.”

Turner, however, was premature in his pronouncement. The “Yaqui nation” did not die during the early twentieth century, though one might say it entered into a period of dormancy. The Yaquis had been stretched too thin to function as a tribal whole. Aside from those who suffered through deportation, others managed to remain near the Yaqui River, masking their Yaqui identity so as not to attract official attention. Some used area mountain ranges as a base of operations, stubbornly perpetuating the tribe’s rebellion against Mexico. Some moved to Sonora’s larger cities—Guaymas, Hermosillo, Ciudad Obregón—and disappeared into the local labor force. And still others sought refuge in the United States, settling in or near cities such as Tucson, Phoenix, and even Los Angeles. Thus, while Turner was enjoying immense success with the publication of his “Barbarous Mexico” series, the Yaquis were testing out a variety of survival strategies. And they were not alone. The Kickapoos and Tohono O’odham were also contending with the legacy of attacks on their autonomy, and their responses, as this chapter demonstrates, mirrored those of the Yaquis in significant ways. By the turn of the century, all three groups were in the unenviable position of having to rebuild their societies, cultures, and governments from the ground up. Geographic space, and even geopolitical boundaries, separated families and tribal members, interrupted kinship and land use patterns, and complicated efforts to maintain tribal cohesion and cultural continuity.
Yet in the process of confronting these new sets of challenges, physical movement on a transnational scale gradually became, for the Yaquis, Kickapoos, and Tohono O’odham, a tribal imperative, the most convenient and expedient strategy to regain lost autonomy. Further, it was a strategy which, although improvised in fits and starts under less than ideal circumstances, meshed well with tribal traditions of movement. The Tohono O’odham’s migration legend, cited above, attests to the fact that tribal movement has a long history within O’odham culture. And the very name “Kickapoo” is Algonquian for “he moves about.”

In fact, when asked in 1868 if he would prefer to live on a reservation in the United States or “become a Mexican,” one Kickapoo reportedly replied, “God is my Captain—the world my Camping ground, and I am at liberty to go where I choose.”

One scholar recently observed that the Yaquis’ history of displacement and movement has come to define Yaqui identity, as evidenced, for example, by contemporary Yaquis’ regular use of the word “nómada” in discussing tribal history. Thus, those
familiar with these groups would not be surprised by their assumption of a transnational orientation in the pursuit of a tribal agenda or agendas. After all, movement across boundaries that had been defined by outsiders was a common historical experience among these three indigenous groups. This chapter explores the myriad factors that forced these Indians to “go transnational,” in a manner of speaking, beginning with their earliest contacts with Europeans and concluding early in the twentieth century. Though often viewed by outsiders as last-gasp strategies to postpone the “final act” in their various dramas, these groups’ new patterns of spatial distribution ultimately evolved into broader strategies aimed at maintaining tribal cohesion and cultural continuity while negotiating the greatest possible degree of sovereignty.

The Yaqui Struggle for Autonomy

Attacks on Yaqui autonomy had become commonplace by the time Turner arrived on the scene, having occurred with a disquieting regularity since the beginning of the tribe’s documented history. When first encountered by Europeans, the Yaquis lived in a cluster of pueblos along the Yaqui River delta region, which contained, and still contains, some of the most productive agricultural land in North America. Although their language and culture, according to the anthropologist and Yaqui specialist Edward Spicer, was “nearly identical” to that of the neighboring Mayos, their respective responses to the arrival of the Spanish immediately differentiated the two. The Mayos, in short, consistently sought to ally themselves with the newcomers, while the Yaquis did not. The earliest known conflict between the latter and invading Spaniards occurred in 1609, and resulted in the Spaniards’ quick and easy defeat at the hands of an estimated 7,000 Yaqui soldiers. Rather than risk what would likely have been a long series of violent clashes with the invading Spanish, however, the Yaquis invited Jesuit missionaries into the Yaqui River valley in 1617, and were ultimately sent Fathers Andrés Pérez de Ribas and Tomás Basilio. Both reportedly received an enthusiastic welcome upon their arrival in the river valley. Jesuit occupation, the Yaquis wagered, would be preferable in the longer term to further warfare, military occupation, or worse. It was the first in a long series of inspired strategies to maintain group cohesion, a cohesion that as of the seventeenth century seemed contingent on proximity to the river and the modest bounty that it made possible. Accepting the Jesuits also meant reluctantly acquiescing in the invading Europeans’ efforts to incorporate
the Yaquis into what Spicer called “the great Spanish political leviathan.” The Indians incorporated elements of Catholicism into their own belief system, learned Spanish, and accepted some strictures of colonial government. Unlike the great bulk of indigenous peoples who confronted European customs, institutions, and military might with trepidation (if not outright hostility), the Yaquis adapted surprisingly well. In the 150 years of Jesuit occupation, the Yaquis experienced a period of remarkable creativity, revitalization, and growth, while also managing to retain their fertile lands and avoid taxation. Scholars have gone so far as to question whether or not we can speak of the Yaquis as a tribal unit before the arrival of the Jesuits. Through tribal stories the Yaquis have hinted that their conversion to Catholicism helped unite disparate peoples under the umbrella of a single cultural and political entity. And as the historian Rafael Folsom pointed out, “The Jesuits agreed in some sense, claiming to have defined them as a distinct nation.”

But although the relationship between the Yaquis and the Jesuits appeared to be one of give-and-take, it would not be a stretch to argue that the Yaquis were bargaining from a position of strength, and that all involved knew it. In fact, Folsom describes those Jesuits who lived among the Yaquis as “marginal figures,” “pawns,” and “tools” that the Yaquis used “for the furtherance of their own political ambitions.” Still, the Yaquis’ experience with the Jesuits helped establish a tradition of advancing their agenda “within, not against, the structures of empire.” He explains, “Throughout the colonial period the Yaquis pursued their interests through tough negotiation, offers of valuable aid, threats, and tactical violence. These acts were always enveloped in a shared understanding that reciprocal ties with the empire would be sustained.” It was a diplomatic attitude and approach, as will be shown, that would outlive the colonial era. Under the Spanish, then, the Yaquis managed to maintain a remarkable degree of autonomy. As Folsom concludes, “The fragmentation of the colonial government and the swirling rivalries among the Jesuits, secular institutions, miners, parish priests, and Franciscans made it impossible to impose colonial rule on the Yaquis in a direct and intensive way.”

The Jesuit period came to a close in 1767, however, when the Spanish colonial government, acting on the orders of King Carlos III, called for their expulsion, likely in an attempt to remove a formidable obstacle to secular reform throughout Spain’s empire. Couple this development with Mexican independence early in the next century, and the Yaquis’ situation began to appear increasingly precarious. Sonora evidently met the distant war for
independence from Spain with a collective yawn. Although fighting did take place in New Spain’s far northwest, Sonorans fought, in Spicer’s words, “without much intensity, perhaps without much conviction.” As for the Yaquis, the handful who participated in the conflict fought on the side of the royalists, perhaps fearing that a more invasive government might replace the mostly hands-off Spaniards. In fact, by war’s end it would become clear that the Indians in the region interpreted the independence struggle quite differently from the rest of the new nation. Thereafter, periodic indigenous unrest would serve to indicate that these groups considered themselves independent of any and all political entities with European origins, even those directed by native-born descendants of the Spanish. In short, the Yaquis and their neighbors made clear that they would submit only to indigenous authority, an attitude held by the tribe long before Mexico’s war for independence, and one that the birth of a new nation-state in their midst only reinforced.11

Thus, new patterns of violence among Sonora’s indigenous communities accompanied the change in government, as Mexico’s Indians continued to resist challenges to local autonomy. The Yaquis, especially, began resorting to armed resistance more frequently during the early Mexican national period. Their first major conflict with the Mexican government occurred in 1825, only four years after Mexico established its independence, and perhaps not coincidentally it happened at a time when the tribe was becoming more mobile. A series of famines during these years repeatedly forced many Yaquis out of their villages for seasonal employment in the regional economy. The Mexican government, meanwhile, came to view Yaqui mobility as a direct threat to internal security, since it had long equated mobile Indians with hostile Indians. At the same time, however, the Mexican government recognized Yaqui mobility as an opportunity to weaken the Yaquis’ hold on the Yaqui River delta. While it appears that the Yaquis had hoped for even greater freedoms under the new government, including possibly a seat in the Mexican Congress, the arrival of tax assessors on Yaqui farms in 1825 dashed any such hopes. Rebellion soon followed. Led by Yaqui Juan Banderas, the uprising had as its primary goal the establishment of an Indian confederation in Mexico’s Northwest. Banderas managed to unite not just the Yaqui people, but also members of the Opata, Lower Pima, and Mayo tribes. Since the federal government had its hands full with the Apaches on Mexico’s northern border, responsibility for quelling the Yaqui rebellion fell to the state level, and the state was, at best, ill equipped for the task. The Banderas rebellion highlighted the fact that Sonora’s Indian policy overall
tended to be merely reactionary, confronting problems as they arose in lieu of devising a long-term plan. It also highlighted the fact that the disorganized and financially strapped state did not have the clout, military, political, or economic, to enforce any kind of policy measure anyway. Luckily for local officials, the Banderas rebellion ultimately fell apart. Although it failed to give rise to an Indian confederacy, other circumstances intervened to help stave off the physical encroachment of non-Indians, at least for the time being.\textsuperscript{12}

This is not to say, however, that the Mexican government did not continue in its efforts to divest the Yaquis of their homeland. In 1828 the government announced that it was officially bestowing citizenship on the Yaquis and decreeing that Indians and whites be treated equally under Mexican law and in Mexican society. In so doing, the Mexican government appeared to be extending an olive branch of sorts. Yet, one historian argued, although these new laws “masqueraded as acts of generosity,” they were, in reality, “attacks on everything the Yaquis held dear.” Citizenship represented “an attack on the special rights, privileges, and cultural peculiarities the Yaquis had developed over the course of the colonial period,” while the statement of equality essentially served as an invitation to non-Indians to settle on Yaqui lands. In fact, the Mexican government ultimately offered tax incentives to non-Indians to do just that. The Yaqui homeland was clearly under siege, and the situation would only deteriorate in the coming decades.\textsuperscript{13}

Those who chose to leave the Yaqui homeland to participate in the broader Mexican economy, meanwhile, did not always fare well. At Chihuahua’s mining center, La Villa de San Felipe El Real de Chihuahua, for example, the Yaquis had established a presence by the mid-1850s. They formed their own settlement complete with their own chapel on the outskirts of the primary Mexican settlement. Although historians have tended to laud such efforts on the part of the Yaquis to maintain their political and economic independence, this is one instance where at least some tribal members had clearly grown dependent on wage labor. As one scholar put it, “Yaquis used to be considered quite autonomous and resistant against colonization, but as shown in the case of the mining centers during colonial times they were the ones who suffered the most.” Because of the back-breaking nature of the work, the lack of proper ventilation, and the constant contact with mercury, “nobody would be willing to work in the mines,” with the exception of the Yaquis. Thus, many suffered a slow death due to lung disease. They remained bound to the mine owners by debts, and could face legal action if they attempted to abandon the mines.\textsuperscript{14}
Part of their participation in the non-Indian economy, however, could also be explained by a well-documented propensity for travel. Writing in 1761, for example, a Spaniard described a group of Yaquis who had migrated to Chihuahua as being “of a hardworking spirit and inclination, very dedicated to mining, which they love, and for that reason, in distinction from other Indian nations, they are hardly rooted, if at all, in their home soil; and they are of a spirit so haughty and generous that it impels them to travel.” Indeed, another Spaniard observed that although the Yaqui mission towns were more populous than any other mission towns in the region, roughly two-thirds of the population of each lived elsewhere, including nearby Soyopa, Chihuahua, Parral, and Santa Barbara. Put simply, the Yaquis had learned that mobility equaled freedom. Although that freedom had its unique pitfalls, it was but one of many strategies designed to help maintain their distinctive political and, especially, cultural identity.  

Then, with Vice Governor José T. Otero’s 1879 announcement before the Sonoran Congress that “there is in this state an anomaly whose existence is shameful for Sonora,” significant events in Yaqui history began unfolding at a dizzying pace. Otero was referring to Cajeme, the Yaquis, and their “separate nation within the state.” During the intense Cajeme period, from 1875 to 1887, a long tradition of Mexican expansion into Yaqui territory met an abrupt end as hopeful colonists suddenly found themselves unable to wrest lands granted to them by the Mexican government from the increasingly determined Yaquis. Aware of Cajeme and the Yaquis’ growing stronghold, many colonists simply fled, forfeiting their claims rather than risk conflict. The Mexican government, perpetually embroiled in bitter factional struggles during these years, was unable to give top priority to confronting the Yaqui problem. All that changed, however, under President Porfirio Díaz.  

The Díaz regime had as its main objective national economic development, which, at least in the state of Sonora, first required the removal of “marauding” Apaches, followed by an increase in statewide mining and agricultural production, improvements in communication and transportation networks, and, lastly and most significantly, colonization of the fertile lands of the Yaquis and Mayos. Among those developments that spurred the regime to action were reports of an 1883 Los Angeles Times article, entitled “Seductive Sonora,” which claimed that Mexico would “see Sonora an American state within five years if the present influx of Americans continues.” It was not the only article to play on Mexican fears that another embarrassing loss of territory might be imminent. Only days before the Arizona
Daily Star reported that a New York speculator had recently acquired then sold several Yaqui mines to an Englishman. Needless to say, the recent publicity surrounding Sonora deeply concerned the Porfiran government given its tenuous, and ever weakening, hold on the region.¹⁹

On March 31, 1885, then, Díaz launched a concerted military campaign designed to oust the Yaquis from the fertile river valley, and by early 1886, after less than a year of skirmishes of increasing intensity, federal forces finally overwhelmed the Indian “rebels.” By this time, yellow fever and general malnutrition were taking their toll on the group, while the high morale that Cajeme had once inspired seemed to have vanished. In fact, the majority surrendered despite Cajeme’s pleas that they continue fighting. As for the few who remained committed to Yaqui independence, Cajeme divided them into small bands and orchestrated a guerrilla campaign against federal troops, who, following the mass surrender, mistakenly thought themselves victorious. Tribal members sustained the guerrilla campaign, however, hiding out in Sonora’s Bacatete Mountains between attacks, well into the twentieth century.²⁰ They would also remain subject to deportation well into the twentieth century. An official correspondence from 1904 estimated that 822 Yaquis had either already been deported or were awaiting deportation that year alone, while in 1908 that number reached 1,198. The program evidently peaked in 1908, and although exact figures are unknown, scholars are confident that several thousand of the estimated 30,000 Yaquis suffered through deportation. The tribe now appeared hopelessly fragmented, thinly spread across Mexico and the southwestern United States. As Edward Spicer observed, “Not even the Cherokees, whose deportation in 1835 from Georgia to Oklahoma had initiated a scattering over the United States, were so widely dispersed.”²¹

The Mexican government launched another campaign to end the seemingly doomed Yaqui insurrection in early 1900, its goal being to wipe the Bacatete Mountains clean of rebel Indians. Tetabiate, Cajeme’s successor, who had declared war against the Mexican government the previous year, managed to escape the onslaught, but several hundred Yaquis died in the conflict, with many simply jumping off cliffs to their deaths. Meanwhile, troops took approximately 1,000 women and children prisoner. One newspaper account reported that Mexican forces actually employed a gunboat in the campaign, while the Yaquis employed a Maxim gun. “Such a modern weapon in the hands of the aborigines of this continent is a circumstance well worthy of passing notice,” the article editorialized. Passengers on a train bound for Hermosillo, another newspaper reported, were treated to a
“ghastly sight” in 1905, when from the train they spotted the bodies of six Yaqui “chieftains” hanging from trees and telegraph poles. The Mexican military, the article claimed, often allowed executed Yaquis to remain strung up “for days and sometimes weeks as an example to others of their tribe.”22 The campaign had clearly taken a brutal turn.

Mexican officials, however, often bristled at the press coverage north of the border, frustrated that it too often assumed an anti-Mexican and pro-Indian tone. For example, one Washington Post article characterized the Yaquis as “exceedingly peaceful” unless provoked. In explaining why the Yaquis had gone “on the warpath” against the Mexican government, the article quoted one non-Indian American informant who claimed, “He may be a very bad Indian, and all his friends to whom he took rifles may be bad, but they are methodical in their hardness, and it does not seem entirely foolish to suppose they believe they have been badly dealt with by someone in their own country.”23 Another article from north of the border, written in response to the Mexican government’s deportation campaign, characterized the Yaquis as “the most industrious, the most responsible, honorable, and virtuous of the working class in Sonora.”24 Mexican officials, meanwhile, claimed that the recent press coverage tended to exaggerate the size of the “rebel forces,” often tried to justify the Yaqui rebellion, and, most seriously, often “belittled government forces” and their efforts to suppress what they viewed as indiscriminate Yaqui violence.25 In fact, there is evidence that the state departments in both nations were working to limit the amount of press coverage the Yaqui campaign received.26

Regardless, following this latest campaign, the Yaquis entered into one of the most difficult eras in their history, one marked by a sharp decline in their standard of living and a sharp increase in both official and unofficial harassment. When turn-of-the-century census data indicated that an estimated 15 percent of Sonora’s population was of Yaqui ancestry, officials took more drastic measures in singling out, then harassing and intimidating, the remaining Yaquis in hopes of breaking the resolve of those who still harbored separatist pretensions. In 1902, for example, newly elected governor Rafael Izábal ordered that Yaqui Indians over the age of sixteen don “identification passports,” as one scholar called them, at all times. Those who refused to register and identify themselves as Yaqui, the governor warned, would be subject to arrest and even deportation. In 1906, Izábal expanded the law, simply ordering the arrest of all Yaquis, whether they were abiding by the regulation or not. “Frankly,” the governor claimed, “I don’t see any other solution for these indios.”27 But as one scholar gleaned from
survivors of this tumultuous period, one attitude appeared widespread, namely, that the Yaquis “might be refugees or displaced persons for years and years, but Yaqui culture and the Yaqui homeland would transcend these temporary events.”

Not only would the Yaquis transcend the Mexican nation’s extermination campaign, they would also transcend the Mexican nation itself. Unmentioned in John Kenneth Turner’s *Barbarous Mexico* are those Yaquis who escaped persecution by turning to the United States for sanctuary. In the 1930s, Yaquis in Arizona would bitterly recount these transborder escapes, often hastily arranged and executed under cover of night in anticipation of the increasingly frequent raids by rural police on the Sonoran haciendas. To many Yaquis the United States appeared to offer the only alternative to the threat of deportation and an uncertain fate on the Yucatán plantations or a life of transience and uncertainty in area mountain ranges. It was an option that was not on the table for long, however. Because of a recession in the United States early in the twentieth century, officials stepped up their efforts to close the border to further immigration. While their efforts did not completely halt Yaqui migration north, they certainly managed to slow it. Other Yaquis steadfastly refused to leave the tribe’s homeland. For example, when his family suggested they relocate to Arizona, Manuel Alvarez replied, “No. I have to die here.” The following day he did just that. Mexican soldiers located Alvarez and hanged him from a mesquite tree for allegedly aiding Yaqui insurgents in the Sierra. Other Yaquis remained in Sonora, but either masked or completely abandoned their Yaqui identity, taking agricultural jobs, or working as artisans or laborers in any one of a number of Sonora’s cities. It apparently was not uncommon for a portion of their wages to end up in the hands of Yaqui guerrillas.

Despite the upending of their way of life in Sonora, those Yaquis who remained ultimately found their proximity to the border fortuitous for reasons other than convenient access to their Arizona safe haven. While conducting their military campaign against the Mexican regime, the Yaquis learned that they could cross the border into Arizona and easily earn wages to purchase much-needed supplies, supplies that could aid in their long struggle against the Mexican government. Mining enterprises in Bisbee in particular appear to have been popular destinations for Yaqui migrants. Arizona, then, became more than just a safe haven for Yaqui refugees. It also became a kind of arsenal. Although ever more carefully monitored in the early twentieth century, the border was certainly not hermetically sealed. If queried by U.S. officials, these Yaquis sometimes claimed to be Mayos. The
Mayos, in the words of one Yaqui, were “favored by the Mexican authorities” because of their devout Catholicism, and thus often left alone. Some also claimed to be Opatas, which was another far less maligned tribe. And still others simply claimed the nationality of the nearest neighboring tribe.  

The United States, however, soon came under fire by Mexican officials as it became increasingly clear that Arizona was serving as an informal base of operations for Yaqui campaigns against Mexico and, more specifically, the Díaz regime. In fact, in 1904 the Mexican government demanded that the United States not only bar the sale of arms and ammunition to Yaqui Indians, but also more carefully monitor their movements throughout the state. At one point the city of Tucson even hired (with Mexican funds) a private detective, an American named Oscar Carrillo, to look into rumors of arms sales to Yaquis and to track suspicious tribal members. In the end, however, he had nothing incriminating to report. The Mexican consul in Phoenix accused the Tohono O’odham of helping the Yaquis acquire arms and ammunition, going so far as to request a thorough search of all area Indian reservations for evidence of complicity in the Yaquis’ rebellion. Some Tucson merchants protested the ongoing crackdown on arms sales to Indians, such as José Ronstadt from the famous Ronstadt family, who balked at being denied the right to profit from the Yaqui rebellion, especially since, he claimed, dealers on the other side of the border in Cananea, Sonora, were happily outfitting Yaquis. In short, a crackdown on arms sales to Yaquis was a problematic request. Those selling arms to the Yaquis were not doing so, in the words of one U.S. attorney, “with any design to provide the means for a military expedition or enterprise to be carried on against the government of Mexico,” but were only trying to make a buck. U.S. officials needed evidence of “intentional equipping” of rebel Yaquis, in other words, in order to take action. U.S. officials did, however, agree to step up their efforts to enforce a provision of Arizona’s criminal code that prohibited arms sales to Indians, and ultimately instructed a U.S. marshal in Arizona to take action in “breaking up the practice complained of.” It was a tall order. As one scholar put it, “The U.S. reservation system, the extensive social and economic networks of the Yaqui, the Yaquis’ ability to pass as Mexican, and the easy availability of arms on the border facilitated Yaquis’ participation in transnational circuits of power.”

Arizonan officials initially granted refugee Yaquis safe haven secure in the knowledge that mining and railroad companies would happily absorb them as laborers. That arrangement changed between 1906 and 1907, how-
ever, when an economic downturn tightened southern Arizona’s labor mar-
ket. Thereafter, American officials, acting on orders from the U.S. State
Department, saw to it that recent Yaqui migrants were deported, even know-
ing full well that these migrants likely faced, at best, deportation to the
henequen plantations and, at worse, extermination. Indeed, the Mexican
government’s coordinated campaign was still wreaking havoc on Sonora’s
Yaquis in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1885, the Mexican
government estimated that the Yaqui population stood at around 20,000
(which was likely a conservative estimate). In 1900, a government expedi-
tion into the Yaqui River valley counted just over 7,000. In 1907, the first
census conducted by the Porfiriato counted only 2,723. Another early
twentieth-century survey found that only 1,680 were engaged in agricul-
tural pursuits, which led authorities to conclude that the Yaquis had adopted
urbanization as a survival strategy. It was a development that, in the words
of one scholar, “signaled a dwindling connection to a Yaqui rural space of
autonomy.” The trend would not continue, however. With the Mexican Rev-
olution of 1910 and the toppling of the Díaz regime, the deportation cam-
paign immediately became a thing of the past, and the Yaquis came out of
the figurative woodwork.35

Not surprisingly, in the wake of Díaz’s ouster in May 1911, the Yaquis
chose to side with Mexican revolutionaries. And their very visible partici-
pation in the Mexican Revolution, again not surprisingly, was rooted more
in a determination to advance their claims to sovereignty than in an altru-
istic concern for the fate of the Mexican nation. Put simply, the objectives
of the revolution, which included first and foremost a more equitable pol-
cy of land distribution, meshed well with Yaqui convictions and gave them
some hope of reclaiming lost lands. They fought particularly hard on be-
half of famed general Alvaro Obregón, presumably because rumor held he
had some Yaqui blood. While the rumor was not accurate, Obregón had, in
fact, been raised near a Mayo Indian pueblo and was just as fluent in Mayo
as he was in Spanish.36 Just prior to assuming office as the new Mexican
president in 1911, Francisco Madero promised a delegation of Yaquis that,
because of their service, he would not only restore their lands, but pay them
a wage of one peso a day to serve as a sort of military reserve; invest in
school, farm, and church development around the Yaqui River; and decree
a thirty-year Yaqui tax exemption in return for their support. While the
Yaquis’ gamble appeared to be paying off, Madero’s assassination eighteen
months later ensured that the well-intentioned agreement never saw the
light of day, and Yaqui resistance to Mexican authority continued.37
In 1916, Mexican officials negotiated an official armistice with the Yaquis. The terms of the armistice were simple: the Yaquis would agree to inhabit a series of villages selected by the government in the river valley, and the government, in return, would see to it that the Yaquis were well fed. The agreement also allowed the Yaquis to keep their firearms—a great selling point from the Indians’ perspective, but one that the Mexican government likely regretted, since the armistice was short-lived. The following year, between 1,000 and 1,500 Yaquis, evidently feeling stifled, concluded that the villages were little more than Yaqui concentration camps and fled the area. They definitely did not go quietly, however, leaving what one scholar described as a “trail of destruction” in their wake. The federal government then declared war on the Yaquis anew in the wake of this incident, and sporadic violence once again became the norm. “The Indian trouble is now considered more serious than in years,” one observer concluded, adding, “The effect of a campaign of many months has thus been lost.” Thereafter, however, the Yaquis began slowly filtering back into the Yaqui River valley, and the Mexican government, in a perennial budget crunch, was unable to respond in a meaningful way.

Then around 1919, the Yaquis once again began lashing out at their non-Indian neighbors. That year, Yaquis attacked a group of Mexican travelers en route to Hermosillo, killing two. They then fled to the mountains west of Guaymas. Shortly thereafter, a local found two Mexican woodchoppers nearby who had been tortured and killed. The Yaquis also tortured and murdered a Mexican man and his five-year-old son. One official noted that “practically all the ranches had been abandoned” in those areas where the Yaquis were most active. In one instance, an estimated 200 Yaquis surrounded the town of Potam, just south of Guaymas, and attacked. Once a Yaqui stronghold (and one of the original eight pueblos), Potam was increasingly overrun with non-Indians. These inhabitants tried to defend themselves but finally fled the Yaqui onslaught. The Indians then proceeded to loot the town. Sensing that an attack on the immediate area’s largest city might be next, the American consul in Guaymas warned the U.S. secretary of state, “Guaymas is absolutely without military protection, there being little to prevent a disastrous raid upon the city if the Yaquis choose to make it.”

The Yaquis again drew the ire of U.S. officials when, in 1919, they attacked and looted an American-owned mine named El Progresso, prompting U.S. officials to demand that Mexico step up its efforts to protect American lives and property. The Mexican military launched a counteroffensive a little over
a month later to ferret out those Yaquis responsible for the assault on the mine, taking three Yaqui lives and recovering much of what the Yaquis had stolen. The underlying cause of the latest surge in violence is not difficult to understand. The Yaquis had simply grown impatient waiting for the Mexican government to deliver on the promise made to them at the outset of the revolution, and thus began venting their frustration. As an American ambassador to Mexico explained in 1911, “The reasons given for the attitude of these Indians is that certain lands which were to have been returned to them at the close of the recent revolution have not been returned.”

Indeed, by the 1920s, thousands of Yaqui exiles had returned to southwest Sonora only to find the more fertile areas of the Yaqui River valley occupied by non-Indians. Still, they returned determined to reclaim their autonomy, even if it meant initially settling on the north bank of the river and submitting to life as landless agricultural workers. In 1925, Yaqui chief Francisco Pluma Blanca petitioned the Mexican government, as the historian John Dwyer explains, “under the constitutional provision that provided for the restitution of usurped property to indigenous communities.” More specifically, the chief called for the return of lands that included Bacum, one of the original Yaqui towns established by the Jesuits. The administration of Plutarco Elías Calles denied the request. Compounding tensions in the mid-1920s was a surge in non-Indian migration to the region. Suddenly alarming amounts of water were being diverted from the Yaqui River for what turned out to be mostly American agricultural interests. In September 1926 the Yaquis took up arms once again, brazenly, though briefly, taking former president Obregón and some 150 federal troops hostage at the Vicam train station. Though freed without incident, Obregón vowed revenge. Soon thereafter, the federal government sent some 20,000 troops to attack Yaqui settlements. Hundreds of Yaquis died; many more fled into the Bacatete Mountains. Some were captured and conscripted into the Mexican army, and some were deported into the nation’s interior. The fighting became even more ferocious when the Mexican government ordered the bombing of the nearby mountains by military aircraft. By the mid-1930s, Dwyer writes, “repression pervaded the Yaqui country, which resembled a military camp with thousands of federal troops stationed in Yaqui villages.”

Meanwhile, although many Arizona Yaquis returned to Sonora after the fall of the Díaz regime, still others remained in the United States with the intention of establishing what Edward Spicer called a “new branch of Yaqui society,” bearing a “variant stream of Yaqui tradition.” The convoluted
story of Lucas Chávez, relayed to Spicer in the 1930s, exemplifies the experiences of many Yaquis during this period. As a child, Chávez made regular trips with his father from the Yaqui River valley to Guaymas to buy in-demand products, such as needles or handkerchiefs, then would return to the Río Yaqui to peddle and barter. Guaymas was evidently not the most inviting place for a young Yaqui, and ridicule directed at Yaquis by Mexicans was common. “They would say ‘chinga, chinga’ all the time,” he recalled. “Yaquis eat horses” was another popular taunt. He also recalled instances of Mexicans entering the Río Yaqui valley, violating young women, and generally doing “unjust things.” In short, he understood the impulse, so prevalent among Yaquis, to fight the Mexicans. In fact, the elders of the tribe used to tell him, “Better for our lands to go into the hands of any other nation than to go into the hands of the Mexicans.” After the death of his father, Chávez worked as a field hand in various locales until drifting into the United States in the 1890s to work on the railroad. He ultimately settled near Tucson, in Pascua, because of the growing Yaqui population there. Along with Pascua, Phoenix was a popular haven for Yaquis, since those willing to pick cotton could earn respectable wages there. After the season ended, however, many of these workers returned to Pascua. Chávez recalled a string of decent, fair Anglo “mayordomos,” or bosses, one of whom married a Yaqui. “She spoke Yaqui all the time,” he remembered. “And her daughters . . . they spoke Yaqui too.” In the 1930s, he retired from manual labor, opted to stay in Pascua, and reportedly handled the mail for the village. Interestingly, when asked whether or not the Pascua Yaquis had a chief, he replied that it was unnecessary since “here political affairs are taken care of by the state government and Yaquis therefore don’t need a Yaqui chief.” “After all,” he added, “are we not foreigners here?”

Networks of migrating Yaquis like Chávez, many of whom had already worked in the United States, played a vital role in informing those who remained in Sonora of opportunities north of the border. In his autobiography, the Yaqui poet Refugio Savala recounts his family’s experience after fleeing the “heartless killers” in Mexico. Savala’s father had already been living in Arizona when the Mexican government launched its deportation campaign. After saving enough money, he returned to Sonora not only to retrieve his family, including his newborn son (appropriately named Refugio, or “refugee”), but also to spread word of good wages across the border. Many followed his example and undertook the trek to the United States. Savala’s family moved their belongings to Arizona on the backs of four pack mules, and quickly found shelter, work, and food courtesy of the
Southern Pacific Railroad Company. The railroads apparently welcomed the Yaquis, and evidently treated them with a great deal of civility.\(^{46}\)

Even though their unclear citizenship status and inability to speak English limited their opportunities, at least some Yaquis later characterized their first years in Arizona as carefree, affluent, and stable, standing in stark contrast to their people’s troubled history. Yaqui migration to the United States slowed to a trickle after 1918 or so, however. The reasons for this were myriad. As mentioned above, a tighter labor market in southern Arizona meant that early twentieth-century Yaqui refugees were no longer welcomed with open arms. On top of that, World War I introduced into American popular culture a more general fear of “foreignness,” or of the potential for non-native “undesirables” to, in the words of the historian Alexandra Minna Stern, “contaminate the body politic.” Not coincidentally, then, the advent of the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924, which signaled the beginning of the border’s militarization, roughly coincided with the end of the war, as did ever more rigorous immigration restrictions and new immigration procedures that required transborder migrants to possess passports and visas.\(^{47}\)

Although the Yaquis, in the early twentieth century, had established only a precarious transnational presence, the rest of the century would find them both cementing new ties and at least attempting to renew old ones, all against remarkable odds. Still, the existence of the border, at least in the wake of their dispersal from the Yaqui River, proved crucial for the survival of the tribe. “It seems fairly clear,” concluded Edward Spicer, “that but for the U.S.-Mexico border there could well have been total extinction of the Yaqui people. The border allowed an alternative.”\(^{48}\) The border would continue to serve a crucial function well into the twentieth century, aiding and abetting the growth of the Yaqui nation. In this regard, the Yaquis had much in common with the Kickapoos.

The Kickapoo Retreat

Although eventually settling in the northern portion of the present-day state of Coahuila, Mexico, and Eagle Pass, Texas, the Kickapoos originated from a surprisingly far-flung locale. European records from around 1600 place them between Lake Michigan and Lake Erie, thousands of miles from what they today consider their spiritual homeland. By 1654 they had already fled the Great Lakes region in the face of increasing hostility from the Iroquois, taking refuge, along with the Sauk, Fox, and Potawatomies, in Wisconsin among the Menominee and Winnebago tribes. The arrival of the
French shook up power dynamics in the region, to the Kickapoos’ ultimate detriment. Much later a tribal spiritual leader would drolly recount, “The first white people we met were French. We traded them deer hides and they said, ‘Ah, these are very good hides.’ Then they asked us for a small place to sleep.” Unlike most Algonquian groups, the Kickapoos shunned European-produced goods, including alcohol, and exhibited a conspicuous and consistent hostility toward French Jesuits and their doctrine of forced acculturation. The Kickapoos soon allied themselves with neighboring groups, including the Mascoutens and the Fox, and eventually formed a confederacy. With their power solidified and European numbers increasing, open war was inevitable. The year 1712 marked the first open conflict between the Kickapoos and the French, when tribal members took a French messenger prisoner. The Hurons and Ottawas, allies of the French, retaliated by capturing a canoe filled with Kickapoos and slaying, among others, their principal chief. A formidable military campaign by the French soon followed, forcing the Kickapoos to make peace with the French. It was an uneasy peace, however. Loyalties continued to shift, with the Kickapoos sometimes at odds and sometimes allied with the French, until essentially reduced to pawns in the French and Indian War.49

Imperial struggles between the French and the British enveloped the Kickapoos during this period, and they decided to side with the French. Interestingly, in their ultimately successful attempt to gain the loyalty of the Kickapoos during the French and Indian War, the French presented the tribe with a Louis XV medal, which to this day remains one of their most coveted possessions, residing with the tribe in Nacimiento, Mexico, and serving, from their perspective, as one of many symbols of Kickapoo nationhood. However, the 1763 Treaty of Paris expelled the French from the Great Lakes region, and thereafter hostilities between the Algonquians and the British reached fever pitch. The Kickapoos were among many notable participants in Pontiac’s Rebellion, which culminated in the Ottawa leader Pontiac’s attempt to capture Fort Detroit. When British attempts at reconciliation failed to inspire the Kickapoos, one band fled the region altogether in 1765, taking advantage of an invitation from Antonio de Ulloa, governor of Spanish Louisiana, to settle near Saint Louis.50 Some Kickapoos even worked as mercenaries for the Spanish as a kind of arm of Spanish Indian policy, roaming across Louisiana, Missouri, and Arkansas, taking Osage Indian scalps, prisoners, and plunder. In exchange, they received all the powder and shot they needed, along with tobacco and aguardiente, or brandy.51 From here, the Kickapoos’ history could be characterized as a near-constant retreat. As
Kickapoo Adolfo Anico explained in 1981, “The white man came and pretty soon they were all around us, so we moved south to what is now known as Kansas. Again, once more, the white man came and surrounded us. Again, once more, we moved south to what is now known as Oklahoma. Once again, we moved south into Texas, what is now known as Texas. There we live, and again we moved finally to Eagle Pass, into another area.”

Their journey to Eagle Pass was far more eventful than Anico’s account implies, however. Following the American Revolution, the Kickapoos quickly identified land-hungry Americans as the new enemy, and allied themselves with the British. They fought American forces at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, meeting defeat at the hands of General Anthony Wayne. The Treaty of Greenville, which concluded the conflict, included a provision allocating a $500 annuity for the Kickapoos. Conflict continued, however, and tribal stability remained elusive. The group apparently had nothing but contempt for the Americans. They negotiated with the new nation only halfheartedly, usually engaging U.S. officials only when attempting to have some grievance addressed. In fact, an exasperated William Henry Harrison, realizing relations with the group had become a one-way street, once asked, “My Children, Why does it happen that I am so often obliged to address you in the language of complaint?” Tensions between the Indians of the region and Harrison soon boiled over into violence. The Kickapoos fought alongside Chief Tecumseh’s brother, the Shawnee Prophet, at the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe, and joined British forces during the War of 1812. During the latter conflict, 150 Kickapoo families joined Tecumseh and the Prophet in Ontario at a newly established intertribal village for Indian refugees. In the wake of this series of setbacks, the Kickapoos, during the presidency of James Monroe, ceded more than thirteen million acres of their land between the Illinois and Wabash Rivers in exchange for a tract of land in southeastern Missouri. It was a desperate attempt on the part of the tribe to, as one journalist put it, “avoid the swallowing giant called America.” Roughly 2,000 Kickapoos relocated there, while two bands, each containing roughly 250 tribal members, mostly warriors, stubbornly remained in Illinois.

By the 1830s, then, the Kickapoos appeared hopelessly fragmented. Numbering about 3,000, the tribe had now split into several bands and lived in small pockets from Lake Michigan all the way down to Mexican Territory. A group of roughly 350 held on in eastern Illinois; another group settled on the Osage River in Missouri; several bands, totaling around 900, roamed the Southern Plains; and about 800 settled on the Sabine River in
the province of Texas at the invitation of the Mexican government in order to assist its Cherokee allies with frontier defense. They were part of a broader trend in which thousands of “immigrant Indians,” as one scholar called them, entered Texas after being essentially pushed there by American settlers during the 1810s and 1820s. These Indians, who also included the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and Shawnees, sometimes fought with and sometimes allied themselves with their non-Indian neighbors against Plains Indian raiders. Some had acculturated to the point that they kept domesticated livestock. The Texas Kickapoos initially prospered under the newly established Mexican government. In fact, in return for their loyalty, the Mexican government promised the Kickapoos the title to the lands they were then occupying. Relations between the Mexican government and the Texas Kickapoos deteriorated rapidly, however. The Mexican government instituted a generous land policy that quickly attracted Anglo settlers, the same settlers who, in 1836, rebelled and established the Republic of Texas. The first group of Kickapoos to enter Mexico after the Texas Revolution did so in 1838. Numbering about eighty, they crossed the border to escape the Texas army, eventually settling near Morelos, and began serving as scouts and couriers within the Mexican military. According to one historian, these Kickapoo “mercenaries” were “highly esteemed by the Mexican government.” However, they stayed for only about a year before pulling up stakes and relocating to Indian Territory.

Texas president Mirabeau B. Lamar’s 1839 Indian removal policy was at least partially responsible for the Kickapoos’ relocation en masse to Mexico. Writing to Cherokee migrants that year, Lamar explained, “The people of Texas have acquired their sovereignty by many rightful and glorious achievements, and they will exercise it without any division or community with any other People.” He wrote of his refusal to recognize an “alien political power” within Texas’s borders and concluded with the insistence that the tribe had “no legitimate rights of soil in this country” and as such would “never be permitted to exercise a conflicting authority.” Shortly thereafter, he addressed the Kickapoos specifically, ordering their “immediate removal out of the country . . . without delay.” Although many left after concluding that accommodation with the Texans would be fruitless, others were evidently recruited by “Mexican Emissaries,” according to one official, to help “wage a war of extermination against Northern Texas.” The official predicted “more serious border warfare, than any we have ever yet experienced.” By the eve of the republic’s annexation by the United States in 1845, however, Texas officials had entered into a treaty with the Kickapoos, among other
Indian groups. It was a decision that at least some Texans considered ill advised. Writing in 1847, for example, one Texan argued that the treaty represented “great folly and indiscretion” on the part of the Texas government, since the Indians would inevitably interpret it as a “sanction to their intrusion and a right to settlement.” Had Texas not been annexed by the United States in 1845, he continued, Indian numbers would have “alarmingly increased by immigration from the northern tribes of the United States.” “Annexation,” he concluded, “has arrested this evil.”

Just prior to the outbreak of the U.S.-Mexican War, Indian Commissioner George W. Bonnell put the number of Kickapoos residing within state boundaries at about 1,200. In the wake of the war, the Mexican government began shoring up its “new” frontier with military installations, partly in an attempt to protect settlers from Indian raiders. The government distributed some 200,000 pesos it had received via the terms of the 1848 peace treaty to frontier governors and ordered the establishment of eighteen military colonies along the border. It also granted lands to the Seminoles, Creeks, and Kickapoos in exchange for their vow to participate in frontier defense. Soon thereafter at least some Kickapoos relocated to Morelos, Coahuila, just south of Eagle Pass; then, in July 1850, they were joined by a contingent of roughly 500 Missouri Kickapoos, 100 Seminoles, and 100 Mascogos, or African Americans, at the behest of the Mexican government. The small settlement gradually evolved into a full-scale military colony. Local officials assigned these migrants sixteen sitios de ganado mayor, amounting to approximately 70,000 acres, on a temporary basis at the headwaters of the Río San Rodrigo and the Río San Antonio near present-day Ciudad Acuña. Federal officials threw their full support behind the colonization project, with one describing the migrants as “industrious,” “hard working,” and of good character and habits. The expectation was that they would form a “terrible obstacle for barbarous tribes” along the new border. The agreement between the migrants and Mexican president Benito Juárez further required that they maintain peaceful relations with citizens of both the United States and Mexico and respect the authority of the Mexican Republic. For a variety of reasons, the Mexican government, in 1852, relocated the Kickapoos and their Indian and African American neighbors to Hacienda El Nacimiento, twenty-three miles northwest of what is today the town of Múzquiz. The Seminoles and Mascogos gradually vacated the Mexican tract, many ultimately deciding to relocate to Indian country in Oklahoma, and by 1861 only Kickapoos remained on the tract. Then in 1864 their ranks swelled again when a contingent of Oklahoma Kickapoos migrated to Mexico rather than

Pretty Soon They Were All around Us 39
choose sides in the Civil War. Their trek was an eventful one. While en route, the 600 or so Kickapoo migrants were attacked by Confederate soldiers near the present-day town of Knickerbocker, Texas, along Dove Creek. The outnumbered and disorganized Confederates were routed by the Kickapoos, with some twenty left dead and nineteen left wounded. In the longer term the incident aggravated Kickapoo hostility toward Texans and further hastened their retreat across the Rio Grande.57

Those Kickapoos who chose not to migrate to northern Mexico typically did so because of several concerns. Some questioned the quality of the lands that had been offered by the Mexican government. As one group of Kickapoos later put it, “There was no grass and the land was no good, and the weather was too hot.”58 Some expressed concerns about the cost of moving, while others doubted that securing a claim to lands in Mexico was even possible given their migratory tendencies. Those who did choose to migrate, meanwhile, recognized the fact that, as one historian observed, “the terrain might have been forbidding, but that meant a thinner population.” The “wildness” of northern Mexico, in other words, made it all the more likely that they could “live their lives without so much meddling” from agents of the United States government.59 By roughly 1865, then, the majority of what are now referred to as the Southern Kickapoos had made their way south of the U.S.-Mexico border and put down roots. They apparently greatly appreciated the sympathetic reception they received from the Mexican government, and further admired Mexico’s hands-off approach to Indian policy matters.60

Their agreement with the Mexican government, coupled with their location near the border, presented opportunities for the Kickapoos upon which they could not resist capitalizing. One U.S. consul observed that “so long as the Kickapoos have the protection of the Mexican Government and cross into Texas to loot, rob, and plunder, and as long as these acts are countenanced by the citizens of Mexico, and as long as the Kickapoo can find a ready market for their booty they will never willingly quit.”61 In fact, so profitable was raiding into Texas that Kickapoo warriors found they no longer needed to rely as heavily on agriculture to support their families. They sought and obtained the cooperation of local “political chiefs,” as one historian described them, who would grant the Kickapoos both passports and titles to stolen livestock. Mexican customs officials at Piedras Negras and Nuevo Laredo rounded out the Coahuila “ring,” helping to collect herds of horses and cattle transported by Kickapoo raiders across the Rio Grande in
a canyon near Nacimiento. From there, a network of locals would assist in the disposal of Kickapoo “booty” in nearby Saltillo. Because of the extent of local collusion, these transactions were nice and legal, at least for all practical purposes. Texans did try to use Mexico’s courts to reclaim their lost property, but typically to no avail. As one rancher put it, “It is evident to anyone who tries to receive stolen property from these Indians that they are protected by the Mexican authorities and the citizens of [Coahuila], as well as the merchants there, who . . . conduct an illicit trade with the Indians, encouraging them to raid into Texas.” This phenomenon tends to be typical in border regions up to the present day. As the historian George Díaz put it, “Whereas the Mexican and U.S. governments considered smugglers as criminals and threats, border people regarded many of these same individuals as simple consumers, merchants, or folk heroes.” And lest the Kickapoo case leave the impression that this was strictly a Mexican phenomenon, the historian Peter Andreas argued that the illicit flow of both goods and people, as well as the long string of campaigns to staunch that flow, did no less than help define and shape the American nation, while also serving as a “powerful motor in the development and expansion of the federal government.” Regardless, the U.S. military was so determined to end these transborder depredations that in 1873 General Phil Sheridan authorized an attack on the Kickapoos on Mexican soil. Sheridan of course did not consult the Mexican government before launching this particular campaign. His orders were reportedly as follows: “Let it be a campaign of annihilation, obliteration, and complete destruction.” The military arrived to find that most Kickapoo men were out hunting, so the campaign did not culminate in violence. Those Kickapoo whom they did manage to take captive, however, were subsequently forcibly relocated to Oklahoma. 62

Failing to dislodge them through military means, the U.S. government attempted to legislate the removal of the Kickapoos from El Nacimiento and relocate them to the home of their Kansas counterpart. The reasons were myriad. U.S. officials were evidently upset that so many Kickapoos had taken advantage of what one described as the “partial paralysis of the authority of the United States” during the Civil War and slipped out of its borders, and now sought to return these Indians “to their condition before the war.” U.S. officials were also evidently under the impression that Mexico was either unable or unwilling to provide for the welfare of the Indians, and that transborder raids would remain a fact of life so long as this remained the case. “There is but little doubt,” two Texans wrote to President Andrew
Johnson in late 1865, “but with the proper inducement held out by the U.S. Government they could be induced to return to their Reserve, which would be the most economical and humane way of disposing of them.” Another argued that the sole reason a portion of the tribe remained in Mexico was in order to provide “a place of safety for [their] stolen property,” including horses, cattle, and even captives. Those responsible for the raiding in Texas only had to “cross the River to their kindred who remain in Mexico” whenever “pushed hard” by authorities north of the border. The resultant legislation, passed in 1874, called for “the removal of the Kickapoo and other Indians from the borders of Texas and Mexico,” while also promising support for the relocated Indians. The U.S. Congress evidently sensed problems more serious than Indian depredations on the horizon. “The importance of restoring peaceful relations within the border infested by these roaming and predatory Indians,” the act reads, “cannot be too highly estimated; and their removal to the Indian territory will, it is believed, relieve the authorities of Mexico and the United States from a condition of things which jeopardizes the continuance of friendly relations between the two governments.” Congress predicted that the Kickapoos would, “if encouraged and assisted by the government,” willingly join the “three hundred already removed to the Indian Territory.” “It is difficult to see,” wrote one U.S. official, “what substantial advantage Mexico can expect from retaining these Indians. So long as they remain where they are now, they are tempted to plunder and commit other acts of violence, not only upon Mexicans but upon the American side of the Rio Grande.” In the United States, he claimed, “the Indians are kept from harming others and have a chance of materially benefiting their condition.” When it came time to remove the Indians, however, the Mexican government was not cooperative, the citizens of nearby Santa Rosa were not cooperative, and the Kickapoos, most of all, were not cooperative.63

One problem with removal was that the Kickapoos doubted that the Texans would let them pass through the state peacefully. When asked what would alleviate their fears of passage through Texas up to Indian Territory, one Kickapoo communicated his wish that “a delegation from the reservations in the United States [would] come to them . . . and lead them back” in order to ensure their safety. They were assisted in their recalcitrance by Mexican officials and citizens who had their own reasons for obstructing U.S. efforts to “repatriate” the Kickapoos. After arriving in Mexico, the U.S. legation sent to coordinate removal ran into a host of problems. Local offi-
cials, first of all, demanded that the United States pay for the Kickapoos’ houses, which, they claimed, the Indians were “wrongly in possession of,” according to one member of the legation. Local law enforcement also demanded the U.S. legation pay for horses that the Kickapoos had allegedly stolen. Local citizens, meanwhile, according to the same source, “combined to put up prices on beef, flour, coffee, corn, and sugar to such outrageous prices that I had to send off to surrounding towns for such as the Indians required.” “I have absolutely refused to make any more purchases here,” the head of the legation declared. Once the legation managed to acquire flour, the Indians who consumed it immediately sickened. “The flour was undoubtedly poisoned,” he complained, “with the expectation that the Indians would attribute the act to me.” The Mexican government, meanwhile, claimed that they simply lacked the authority to assist the U.S. legation in their efforts to relocate the Indians, since their laws made no racial distinctions among their citizenry and, thus, all Mexican citizens enjoyed the same constitutional protections. Although the legation attempted to appeal to what one official vaguely described as a “spirit of internationalism and comity,” cooperation was not forthcoming on any level, and the U.S. ultimately made little progress in returning the Kickapoos to their old lands. The fundamental problem was that Mexican officials gave the Kickapoos the option of which nation they preferred to call home. Most Kickapoos were apparently happy where they were.

In one case, however, a group of fifty-five Kickapoos, with “jefe” José Galindo as their mouthpiece, notified Mexican authorities that they desired to leave Mexico and return to the United States. It was evidently not a common request. Although a Chihuahua-based Mexican official notified the U.S. War Department of the Kickapoos’ wishes, Mexico’s cooperation apparently ended there. Writing in 1878, John W. Foster, a member of a subsequent legation put in charge of repatriating the allegedly wayward Kickapoos, expressed surprise and frustration over the fact that “upon learning of the desire of Galindo and his band to return to their reservations in the United States,” Mexican officials did not “indicate a willingness to follow the course adopted by the past administration of Mexico and extend facilities for their return.” It would not be the last time U.S. officials would encounter that lack of willingness when dealing with Mexico.

Meanwhile, the 1887 Dawes Act divided the Kickapoo reservation in Oklahoma into eighty-acre allotments, the idea being to hasten assimilation by replacing tribal with private land ownership. Allotment as a policy
was generally despised by the Kickapoos. As one Oklahoma resident and acquaintance of the tribe put it in the late nineteenth century:

The Kickapoo Indians had been, as we called it, “forcibly allotted,” and the “kicking” Kickapoos were very persistent in resisting any effort the government might make to reconcile them to accept their land or to accept their money, $211. They would have nothing to do with it. They were so prejudiced against the allotment that they even would not drive on a wagon road over the land that had been allotted to them. If they had been starving to death, they would not have signed for provisions for fear they might be signing something that would be an acceptance. They at that time were wild and suspicious Indians . . . they kicked against the treaty; they kicked against the allotment. They were opposed to anything that the government wanted them to do.

Ultimately, the Kickapoos were among many Indian groups for whom the act proved devastating. In fact, roughly 90 percent of Kickapoo lands ultimately fell into non-Indian hands because of the new policy. However not all of those who had allotments succumbed to the temptation to make a quick buck off of them, however, and a small number maintain allotments to this day. Still, this latest assault on their autonomy led many frustrated Oklahoma Kickapoos to relocate to Mexico on a more or less permanent basis, further swelling the ranks of Kickapoos living south of the border year-round.

As an Oklahoma-based attorney with a long history as a tribal advocate revealed, “From the first I knew of them, and always, their life’s dream has been to return to Mexico to be reunited with their children. The first Kickapoo I ever talked with said to me—an old decrepit man—‘If they take my allotment, do you think it may in some way lead to my getting away from here?’” Relocating from Oklahoma to Mexico could also mean escaping more mundane annoyances involving non-Indian neighbors. As another Oklahoman familiar with the tribe explained, “If an Indian's horse got into a white man’s pasture it was $3. If a white man’s horse got into the Indian’s fields and ate up his crops and the Indians took it up, the white man came to the corral and tore it up and said, ‘To the devil with you. This is not Indian country.’ The Kickapoos can not live in a country like Oklahoma.”

Even though south of the border, the Kickapoos were not beyond the reach of non-Indians in Oklahoma who were determined to divest them of what little land remained theirs. In 1905, U.S. Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs C. F. Larrabee complained to the secretary of the interior that white Oklahomans were conspiring to fraudulently acquire titles to Kicka-
poo lands in Oklahoma by sending negotiators to Mexican Kickapoo settlements. The U.S. district attorney for Oklahoma had evidently warned Larrabee that this latest development was “one step in robbing the Kickapoo Indians of all the lands they have and inducing them to remain in Mexico until the robbery is complete.” Larrabee went on to express sympathy for the group, claiming that they were “less intelligent than the average full blood Indian,” were inhabiting a “tract of worthless land” in Mexico, and were generally in a “very bad way in that country.” Thus, he proposed a two-pronged investigation south of the border, one to explore the matter of the land deeds, the other to more generally assess the Kickapoos’ living conditions. In so doing, Larrabee hoped to avoid a scenario whereby the U.S. government would be forced to “expend considerable money in removing the Kickapoos from Mexico.” Larrabee was aware of the implications of conducting an investigation in a “Foreign State,” and promised to acquire Mexico’s consent. Evidently, the Mexican federal government agreed to grant U.S. authorities passage, but only reluctantly. And even then, authorities in Múzquiz remained defiant when the investigation commenced, apparently refusing to “recognize certain duly appointed persons by the Interior Department of the United States,” according to the American embassy in Mexico.

Investigators traveled from Shawnee, Oklahoma, to Coahuila in June 1906, led by Frank Thackery, U.S. superintendent of Indian schools. Upon arrival on Kickapoo lands, Thackery reportedly “found the Indians mostly all dancing.” Soon thereafter local police asked the Americans to leave the Kickapoo village, thereby signaling that local cooperation would not be forthcoming. Upon their arrival in Múzquiz, however, the party immediately located eight men who were paid representatives of “many other men in Oklahoma who have sent the cash here to pay the Indians for their lands.” Sensing that his hands were legally tied while on foreign soil, Thackery recommended hiring a Mexican attorney to begin prosecuting those involved in the allegedly fraudulent activity. A Mexican attorney, Thackery also hoped, would help ensure that the Kickapoos’ rights under both Mexican and U.S. law were protected. Should the Kickapoos lose everything they own in the United States, Thackery feared, it was very likely that they would ultimately end up “paupers,” and it would then not be long before Mexico called upon the United States to remove the group. Thackery also recommended clearing up confusion over the exact nature of Kickapoo land ownership south of the border. “The United States,” he concluded, “should have an equal interest in their getting a proper title to lands in Mexico in order that [the Kickapoos] may not drift back upon us penniless.”
What Thackery did not bother to learn, however, was that the Kickapoos had plans of their own for the Oklahoma allotments. According to Oklahoman E. W. Sweeney, whom the Kickapoos, in Sweeney’s words, “frequently solicited to attend councils . . . where I did the writing for them,” at least some Kickapoos “seemed to have very little regard for their land in Oklahoma.” Sweeney continued, “They wanted to return to Mexico and on every available occasion, at their homes and in council, or anywhere that I might meet a group of them, their foremost thought seemed to be to get away and return to Mexico.” Not only that, but at least some of them “had agreed amongst themselves . . . that they would sell their land in Oklahoma and put it all in a pot together and buy a reservation in Mexico.” Clearly, officials were giving the Kickapoos too little credit. The Indians understood that the allotment policy, although almost universally despised, could be used to their ultimate advantage.71

Few corners of Mexico remained untouched by the Mexican Revolution, and Nacimiento was no different. With the outbreak of revolution, the Mexican Kickapoos fought for Francisco Madero and then, after his assassination, for Victoriano Huerta. Huerta’s overthrow by Venustiano Carranza proved disastrous for the Kickapoos. Carranza’s soldiers took one contingent of Kickapoo soldiers prisoner in retaliation for their loyalty to Huerta, while another group of Carranza’s men forced the Kickapoos to flee their village. The Kickapoos evidently spent the balance of the revolution hiding out, fearing another visit from the troops. In the 1920s, they returned to their tranquil, somewhat isolated existence. However, a seven-year-long drought that began in 1944, coupled with the loss of groundwater due to excessive pumping by the nearby American Smelting and Refining Company (or ASARCO), forced many Kickapoos out of their village yet again, this time in order to seek employment. As one writer put it, “At Nacimiento they had no water except for barely trickling springs. Their wheat crops failed, their cattle starved, and the mountains nearby were largely hunted out. Though Mexico had been generous with loyalty and land, it offered neither jobs nor government assistance.” As they had during crisis after crisis in previous decades, the Kickapoos looked to the border for a solution. It was during these years that they began entering the migrant labor stream north of the border, adopting Eagle Pass, Texas, as their transborder way station, then pouring back into Nacimiento during the winter months.72 It was a strategy that would serve them well, effectively sustaining the small group throughout the twentieth century. Still, it presented almost as many problems as it solved, problems that only worsened as the twentieth century pro-
gressed and transborder traffic came under ever-increasing scrutiny. But even had the Mexican government been more forthcoming with offers of jobs or other forms of aid, it is not likely the Kickapoos would have accepted. Like many of Mexico’s indigenous peoples, they were determined to stay indigenous. In other words, embracing federal assistance might mean inviting federal intrusion and potential overreach. The Kickapoos would make it clear again and again that any entrée into the modern economy would occur in a limited fashion, on their own terms, and in such a way as to not compromise their political and cultural autonomy.73

The Tohono O’odham Divided

Unlike in the cases of the Yaquis and Kickapoos, the Tohono O’odham’s division by the U.S.-Mexico border was not the result of forced migration, but of the imposition of an international boundary by outsiders. The 1853 Gadsden Purchase cut the Tohono O’odham in two, leaving half on the U.S. side and half on the Mexican side. At one time their lands stretched from present-day Phoenix, Arizona, south to Hermosillo, Sonora, and west to the Gulf of California.74 The Tohono O’odham were one of a handful of Sonoran tribes who managed to remain aloof from Spanish and, later, Mexican authority and who were only indirectly affected by missionization efforts. In fact, the historian Jack Forbes suggested that the whole of Sonora was unique in that “all or almost all of the aboriginal groups had survived after some 288 years of warfare and contact, and 211 years of Christian missionary activity.”75 As with the Yaquis, part of their success in maintaining that aloofness was due to their efforts to forge a cooperative relationship with the Spanish early on. For example, they were immediate allies in Spain’s long war against the Apaches, whom the O’odham simply referred to as “Enemy.” Yet because of a variety of cultural and political changes wrought by colonialism, they increasingly found themselves viewing the Spanish, as one scholar put it, “across a chasm of distrust and misunderstanding,” which would strain that relationship and, consequently, strengthen their determination to maintain their independence.76

The Tohono O’odham evidently first beheld Europeans in 1540, when the Coronado expedition clipped the eastern edge of their lands. The sight of hundreds of armed men on horses no doubt impressed them. The Spanish explored their lands further in ensuing years, but after finding no marketable commodities they left the O’odham, whom they eventually dubbed the Papagos, alone for more than a century. In the seventeenth century,
mining activity in Sonora increased, and Spanish settlement grew in tandem. Further, missionary efforts gradually reached farther and farther north into Sonora throughout the first half of the century, culminating in the arrival of Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in the far northwestern edge of New Spain, a region the Spanish called the Pimería Alta. Spanish missionaries eventually encountered a variety of linguistic relatives of the Tohono O’odham. For example, the Hia C’ed O’odham lived northeast of the Gulf of California, while the Akimel O’odham, whom the Spanish called Pimas, lived along the banks of various rivers, such as the Gila. Apparently none of these groups had a sense of themselves as a “tribe” or any other kind of political entity. Rather, their villages and *rancherías* were politically semi-autonomous, though it was not uncommon for these groups to forge temporary alliances in times of trouble. In 1697, Kino entered the Santa Cruz valley, in the heart of O’odham territory, to launch a ranching enterprise. What was initially a business venture evolved by the late 1700s into the massive San Xavier del Bac mission, which would later become the seat of the O’odham reservation. Under Kino’s supervision, the O’odham built a string of missions in present-day Sonora along the Magdalena and Altar Rivers and the Santa Cruz River in present-day Arizona. Kino remained there, teaching, preaching, and exploring, until the end of his life. He also often acted as a moderator when problems arose between the Spanish and the O’odham.77

Despite some initial success in administering to their Indian charges, the missionaries gradually fell out of favor with the O’odham. They monopolized the most fertile lands in the Pimería Alta, and as mining activity increased Spanish settlers began hemming in the O’odham. While some O’odham stayed near the mission or continued laboring on Spanish farms, many who had lost complete use of their land came to depend more heavily on seasonal migration in the pursuit of game and water sources. Their movements, however, were not always economically motivated. Since the missionaries could only administer to so many O’odham, a significant number of Indians got into the habit of traveling to the missions in the winter months so that their children could be baptized with Spanish names and educated in Christian doctrine. This practice gradually evolved into a popular annual religious pilgrimage that continued well into the twentieth century. The O’odham eventually selected the town of Magdalena, just south of Nogales, for its final destination. After Kino’s death in 1711, missionary activity waned, and non-Indian settlers, realizing their vulnerability to Apache and Seri depredations, began filing out of the Papaguería.78
Up until Mexican independence, the O’odham adhered, technically speaking, to the Spanish colonial system of government, in that they elected a village representative who was then confirmed by the provincial governor. Yet they had comparatively little contact with Spaniards. In fact, any aspects of Spanish culture adopted by the O’odham likely came from their regular visits deeper into New Spain rather than from their contact with Spaniards on their own lands. Because of their isolation, the Tohono O’odham remained, by and large, at peace with the Spanish and then the Mexican government. Although the Mexican government colonized O’odham lands west of Hermosillo in order to help control the increasingly troublesome Seri Indians, the O’odham lived fairly independently until 1853. With the Gadsden Treaty, however, the U.S. military rounded up any O’odham they managed to locate south of the new boundary, ultimately numbering about 1,000, and relocated them north to two small reservations, San Xavier and Gila Bend, both near Tucson. Even so, many O’odham evidently remained unaware that a change of government had occurred. As the historian Winston Erickson explains, “Where other Mexican citizens were located within O’odham lands, information about the change of government was available, but some O’odham still maintained allegiance to Mexico decades later because no one had told them about the new international boundary.”

Although perhaps unaware of the boundary’s precise location, at least some O’odham were aware of parties of boundary surveyors moving through their lands during the 1850s. Surveyors moved through the lands of not just the O’odham, but also the Apache, Pima, Maricopa, Yuma, Cocopah, and Diegueño Indians. Some of these Indians served as guides, sources of food and information, and even ethnographic subjects. When the Americans arrived on the lands of the O’odham, they found a people who were mostly living in splendid isolation, with one notable exception. “For generations,” one scholar explained, “a group of distinct bands known collectively as Apaches had raided Pima, Maricopa, Tohono O’odham and Mexican settlements in a cycle of retributive violence.” The American surveyors, then, would have observed a “border landscape littered with abandoned settlements and barricaded towns” and border peoples who nursed a deep hatred of the Apaches (a hatred that was mutual, by the way) that lingered into the early twentieth century. These border peoples, including the O’odham, would go on to cooperate with civil and military officials in protecting the region from incursions not just by the Apaches, but also by American filibusters who were intent on violating Mexico’s territorial sovereignty.
either for personal gain or to add additional territory to the United States. The Tohono O’odham were actually instrumental in thwarting the efforts of one of the most notorious of these filibusters, Henry A. Crabb, who entered northern Sonora in 1857 with a small army of co-conspirators. Within days of their arrival, the O’odham and a collection of soldiers and volunteers managed to locate and surround the American invaders. The O’odham then reportedly shot flaming arrows at the hay-roofed houses into which the Americans had retreated, thereby forcing their surrender and prompting the execution of every member of the filibuster expedition save a sixteen-year-old boy. It was only through the collective effort of Mexican settlers, indigenous communities, and civil and military leaders that, in the words of one scholar, “the boundary line stayed in place and a sense of Mexican national identity continued to develop along the border.”

The O’odham, meanwhile, remained insistent on preserving their independence despite this burgeoning, mutually beneficial relationship with non-Indians. While they happily accepted gifts from the Americans, including tobacco, beads, cotton cloth, various tools, and American flags, they also made it clear that they intended to protect the integrity of their culture, their political structures, and, especially, their territorial holdings. As one O’odham explained to a group of non-Indians in 1856 or 1857, “Every stick and stone on this land belongs to us. Everything that grows on it is our food . . . The water is ours, the mountains . . . These mountains, I say, are mine and the Whites shall not disturb them.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, officials in the United States had a difficult time containing the O’odham north of the border, particularly during hard times. Between 1871 and 1872, Indian agent R. A. Wilbur, in a series of letters to an official within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, warned of worsening conditions around San Xavier brought on by drought and famine. Writing in October 1871, Wilbur described daily visits by O’odham in an “almost a destitute condition” with requests that he provide “the necessaries of life.” “I have explained to them my inability to extend to them any immediate relief,” he wrote, “but promised to represent their case to you.” While some O’odham remained on their designated lands, the looming threat of starvation forced many to seek employment in Tucson, while “by far the greater portion” crossed the border into Sonora “in search of food to keep from starving.” The solution to the O’odham’s increasing woes, Wilbur suggested, was the establishment of a larger reservation. “The settlers are fast crowding them around San Xavier del Bac,” he explained, “and taking up the best portions of the land.” Wilbur’s letters take on a tone of urgency in ensuing
months, culminating in a stern warning in December 1872: “I cannot urge too strongly the importance of securing a Reservation for these Indians.” Apparently his advice went unheeded. The following year, the O’odham were still on the migratory trail and, in Wilbur’s words, “in the habit of crossing the line to aid farmers in Sonora owing to the fact that there was not sufficient work to employ them all here.”

Indeed, they willingly participated in the cash economy when necessary, laboring on both Mexican and American ranches, plantations, and mines even at the expense of more long-standing subsistence patterns. Some even worked transporting and selling salt to area miners from a salt lake near the California coast. The so-called salt pilgrimage was, in fact, a long-standing tradition in O’odham culture, a practice that now supplied the O’odham with a marketable commodity. Increasing mining activity in Sonora during the nineteenth century brought many O’odham south of the border to work in the expanding agricultural sector. The downside, however, was that increased demand for land in Arizona meant that, once “abandoned,” their lands often fell into non-Indian hands. Meanwhile, the same pattern of gradual land loss played itself out on the lands of southern O’odham. Opportunities south of the border waxed and waned throughout the second half of the nineteenth century until, by the turn of the twentieth, very few O’odham chose to live in Mexico. The end result was that the O’odham quickly slid into a pattern of dependency on both sides of the border, and regular migration in search of employment became a fact of life. And although typically characterized as a peaceful people, the O’odham were evidently not above raiding and violence. In the late 1880s, for example, Mexican officials complained that O’odham raiders were stealing Mexican cattle from settlements at Sonoita and El Plomo and then retreating across the border into the United States. Then in 1889 the O’odham launched a transborder raid targeting the Mexican village of El Plomo. The plan was to free a group of relatives that Mexican officials had imprisoned, recover lost O’odham cattle and horses, and then return to the other side of the border. It did not exactly go off without a hitch, however, and five O’odham lost their lives in a shootout with Mexicans before being forced to retreat. One scholar observed that “their self-conscious use of the border,” as during the El Plomo raid, “reflected the growing importance of the boundary in their lives.” And it would only grow in importance over the course of the next century.

Compounding their economic woes, the O’odham were suffering through significant territorial losses during the second half of the nineteenth century.
At roughly the same time, both the United States and Mexico initiated nationwide programs to transfer public lands into private hands with the expectation that this would help spur economic development. The United States passed the 1862 Homestead Act and the 1877 Desert Land Act to achieve these ends, while the Mexican government contracted a series of surveyors to oversee the transference of so-called terrenos baldíos (or vacant lands) to private individuals. In turn, these surveyors received vast tracts of land for their efforts. “These policies privatized huge amounts of land,” one scholar explained, “but were also characterized by inaccuracy, inconsistency, and inequity, leading to the appropriation of millions of acres that were inhabited, used, or claimed by Indians and other borderland people.” The Tohono O’odham in particular lost an untold amount of territory in these efforts at privatization on both sides of the border. It did not take long for Mexican and American ranching enterprises to expand to the point that they directly intruded on lands actively being used by the O’odham, which led to regular conflict over access to the scarcest of resources along the western Arizona-Sonora border: water and grazing land. Many Sonoran O’odham responded to the specter of continued, and potentially worsening, conflict by crossing into the United States, where at least some of them followed the lead of many Arizona O’odham and took low-paying jobs with area ranching outfits. All the while, O’odham dispossession from tribal lands continued.86

These developments, taken collectively, prompted U.S. officials to finally discuss placing the O’odham under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and, especially, creating a larger reservation. After all, the harsh, unforgiving environment in which the O’odham lived required plenty of room to roam.87 Very few O’odham actually lived on either the San Xavier or Gila Bend reservations, likely because neither reservation contained a government agency to administer to the tribe. Nearby agencies, meanwhile, had their hands full with the Gila River Pimas and the Salt River Maricopas. Further, without proper surveillance of O’odham lands by government authorities, squatting by non-Indians was a constant problem. The O’odham’s difficulties accelerated when U.S. officials applied the 1887 Dawes Act, which had already divided up Kickapoo lands in Oklahoma, to the O’odham’s lands. In the early 1890s, officials allotted San Xavier’s lands, then totaling roughly 69,000 acres. The 363 O’odham at San Xavier each received between seventy and one hundred acres (the U.S. government considered the excess acreage worthless). Only if the tribe’s agent deemed them competent in managing their own affairs, the order stipulated, would individual
O’odham receive the legal title to their allotment. However, the O’odham had little experience with the concept of private ownership of land, and just as on Indian reservations throughout the United States, problems soon arose. For instance, officials granted an O’odham named Pedro Eusebio a fee-simple title to his plot in 1909, and Eusebio, in turn, quickly sold a significant portion of his land to non-Indian outsiders, apparently unaware that he was signing away the rights to his allotment. Eusebio died soon thereafter, and his son fought to regain the lost acreage, testifying before the Indian Commission that his father had made an ill-informed decision. His son, however, was unsuccessful, so for many years non-Indians owned land right in the heart of O’odham country. These kinds of misunderstandings perhaps explain why officials never implemented an 1894 executive order calling for the allotment of lands on the Gila Bend reservation. Not surprisingly, then, as the turn of the century loomed, the O’odham found themselves just barely surviving. They were less able to sustain their former way of life and increasingly dependent on the cash economy, working as cowboys, railroad laborers, construction workers, and even domestics.88

The obvious difficulties facing the tribe prompted one Tucson newspaper to query, “What shall we do with our Indians?” The article, published in 1895, assured locals that there were, in fact, “some good Indians who are not dead Indians,” and that it was the government’s responsibility to tend to their welfare “in return for the good done to our people, by them in the dark days of Indian warfare and border strife.” Regarding their meager economic resources in the wake of a “change of circumstances,” the article asked, “What is there for the Indian to do but steal or die?” The community of Tucson evidently held the O’odham in high regard. “It is common for the white man to characterize the Indian as thriftless and good for nothing,” the article continued, “but so far as it applies to the Papagos, it is not true as those familiar with them can bear abundant testimony.” The article described young O’odham women being thrust into prostitution and young men faring little better, since perpetual unemployment often reduced them to “loafers and bummers on the streets.” “Give the Papagos farms and they will work,” the article concluded, adding, “Beyond a little labor it will cost our people nothing.”89

The O’odham’s proximity to the border was also proving problematic. O’odham cattlemen complained to Indian agents repeatedly that tensions across the border, including transborder raiding and the U.S.’s military incursions into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa, had made it too dangerous to round up cattle, particularly those that strayed across the then unfenced
international boundary. O’odham leaders also requested (and actually re-
ceived) arms and ammunition, which they claimed would help them defend
their property from “pro-German” attacks from south of the border. It was
an unlikely scenario, but one that nonetheless attracted sympathetic atten-
tion from U.S. officials. They ultimately surmised that a protected land base
with formally delineated boundaries was the best defense for the precari-
ously located tribe.90

In 1915, the O’odham received a visit from Indian Commissioner Cato
Sells. While there, Sells stressed the importance of education and agricul-
tural training for Arizona’s 40,000 indigenous peoples, not only for their
own well-being but also so that, in Sells’s words, “it will be possible to cut
down the appropriations of the government for the Indians.” Sells went on
to compliment the O’odham directly, lauding their “genius of necessity” and
highlighting the fact that they “fought a winning fight” out in the desert,
utilizing “everything in order to live, every bit of water and even the cact-
us.” Sells ultimately visited every reservation in the United States to get a
firsthand idea of general reservation conditions—a first in the history of the
office of the Indian Commissioner. Although he met with numerous local
officials while in the Tucson area, Sells insisted, according to one news-
paper account, that he had “nothing of local interest to announce, as his
was . . . entirely an inspection trip.”91

In January 1916, however, a tele-
gram arrived in an O’odham village from
Sells announcing that President Woodrow Wilson had, by executive order,
established a permanent reservation for the O’odham. It was a stunning
about-face by a government that still enforced the Dawes Act. Officials ex-
pressed the hope that the reservation, encompassing a staggering 3.1 mil-
lion acres, would provide the 5,500 tribal members ample space to farm and
keep cattle in their desert environment. In other words, while the old lands
at San Xavier and Gila Bend were, according to one newspaper, a “reserva-
tion to all intents and purposes,” the lands selected for the new reservation
had been “formally recognized by the government as Indian territory.”92

Further, while the former reservations, in terms of allotted acreage, had
proved insufficient again and again, the new reservation was, and remains,
among the largest Indian reservations in the United States. It encompasses
roughly the same area as the state of Connecticut or the country of Belgium.
“The advantages to the Indians,” one article concluded, “are so evident that
they scarcely need to be enumerated.”93 Although it comprises only a por-
tion of the Papaguería, which extended into Sonora, the reservation is in-
deed fairly extensive. It includes lands between the Baboquivari Mountains

54  Chapter One
to the west and the Ajo Mountains to the east down to the border and up just south of Interstate 10. There are also small parcels of O’odham-controlled lands at Gila Bend, San Xavier, and Florence, Arizona. The reservation boasts roughly seventy villages, but only one proper town: Sells, which is the capital of the Tohono O’odham Nation. Visible from nearly every corner of the reservation is perhaps the most significant landmark in O’odham culture, Baboquivari Peak, which one scholar described as “the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land, rolled into one.” It is also regarded as “the center of the Tohono O’odham universe,” since the O’odham believe it to be the home of their creator, I’itoi. I’itoi is said to live in a cave beneath the mountain, and tribal members still visit the site and leave offerings such as key chains, rosary beads, cigarettes, and chewing gum. The peak is difficult to miss. A contemporary of Father Kino’s nicknamed it “Noah’s Ark,” and more recently it has become a popular point of reference for undocumented migrants crossing on foot and heading toward jobs in central Arizona (they call it el Tambor, or the drum).

While one newspaper welcomed the reservation grant, suggesting that the O’odham finally had an “adequate” reservation, another lambasted local officials, accusing them of “napping” while Cato Sells seized “500 acres of land for each Papago buck, squaw, and papoose.” Aside from pointing out that the land grant comprised over one-half of Pima County, some of it likely containing the most fertile agricultural lands Arizona had to offer, the article was also careful to note that many of the O’odham were “nomadic Indians from the Mexican side.” Those who claimed that the O’odham were American Indians, another article argued, simply had not done their research. “The home of the tribe,” it argued, “is at Poso [sic] Verde, Sonora, from whence they send their children ‘across the line’ when they want them educated, and from which they come to the Papago country in the beneficent [sic] land of Cato Sells to plant their annual temporals [sic], always returning, with few exceptions, to their Poso Verde home.” Policy makers evidently heard the uproar, and responded in February 1917 by reducing the size of the reservation through an executive order that returned about 475,000 acres to the public domain. These lands came to be known as “the strip” since they ran more or less through the middle of the reservation. Although the government eventually returned the strip to the tribe, as Winston Erickson noted, “that they were removed shows the displeasure and power of those who did not want the lands in Indian hands.”

Although generous by reservation standards, today the reservation encompasses only about a quarter of O’odham lands recognized in Father
Kino’s time. Further, it does not include any O’odham lands in Mexico, leaving southern O’odham to fight their own battles with a different—and often less sympathetic—government. In the end, the creation of a reservation within U.S. borders and U.S. borders alone only further inhibited the tribe’s transborder mobility. Even more than the U.S.-Mexico border, it clearly delineated where the O’odham could live and, by extension, where they could not, at least in the eyes of U.S. officials. Thus, although O’odham migration continued in subsequent years, it nevertheless became increasingly difficult. Born in Pozo Verde, Sonora, in the early twentieth century, Rita Bustamante recalled how normal it was to work on both sides of the border. “I remember when there was no boundary,” she stated. “We O’odham just came and went as we pleased.” But with the outbreak of World War I, suddenly crossing the border became problematic. It had been common for both O’odham and Mexicans to round up cattle along the border every six months or so. In 1916, however, Mexican soldiers prohibited the O’odham from entering Mexico for the first time. Soon thereafter, the O’odham began receiving word that Mexicans were killing and eating O’odham cattle, while also driving the tribe’s horses farther south, making their retrieval by their O’odham owners unlikely. The O’odham spent three years going through diplomatic channels in an effort to reclaim their cattle, but by that time their herds were largely depleted. “They must have longed for the days,” Erickson contends, “when, faced with a similar problem, they armed themselves and retrieved their cattle by force.” Then in the years following the war, the O’odham increasingly began appealing to U.S. officials for help regulating traffic through their reservation, traffic that was resulting in stolen livestock and the smuggling of arms and ammunition into Mexico. The O’odham found the latter trend particularly troubling, in part because the Mexican government, on more than one occasion, had accused them of assisting the Yaquis in their aforementioned struggles over land and autonomy by serving as a conduit for arms and ammunition. Although U.S. investigators found no evidence of O’odham complicity, the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided that it was high time the border running through O’odham land was fenced. “In theory,” Erickson explains, “they continued to have unrestricted access across the border, but as times changed, that access would become less free.” The fence, though not exactly an insurmountable obstacle to transborder migration, was nonetheless a powerful portent of things to come.

The Yaquis and Kickapoos assumed a transnational orientation out of necessity, as a strategy for survival, effectively adapting long-standing migratory patterns to new and ever-changing circumstances. While the
O’odham found their transnational orientation imposed without their consent and, in some cases, their knowledge, they responded in much the same way as the Yaquis and Kickapoos. All three groups turned to the U.S.-Mexico border to find solutions to persistent problems in their homelands, adopted or otherwise. And they were remarkably successful in maintaining tribal cohesion, cultural continuity, and a persistent vision of nationhood even while straddling the borders of the United States and Mexico. Yet increasing contact with these two powerful, looming nation-states often interfered with their hard-won freedom to traverse the border when convenient, expedient, or necessary. In just the first three decades of the twentieth century, the border would evolve from a minor obstacle (at best) to a formidable barrier. U.S. immigration officials especially would step up their efforts to control transborder traffic through inspections and literacy tests, and, as one scholar explained, “Native people who had long identified themselves on the basis of their ties to places and kinship groups [would struggle] to assert their rights in a new national context in which citizenship was an important source of power and privilege.”

Thus, their often uncertain citizenship and/or legal statuses, products of their unusual orientation and migratory habits, meant that non-Indians more frequently challenged their sovereign status as Indians, along with their religious customs, cultural practices, and, especially, patterns of economic subsistence that required transborder mobility. Legislative and policy trends on both sides of the border further complicated efforts at maintaining hard-won transnational networks that enabled tribal cohesion and cultural continuity. In sum, all three groups found themselves facing obstacles that were far more formidable than any border fence. These Indians’ responses to these myriad twentieth-century challenges, however, displayed a level of ingenuity, resourcefulness, and determination that, while remarkable, would not surprise those familiar with their long, troubled histories. In a sense, their early histories had primed them for what lay ahead. The Kickapoos alone had contended with, as one historian observed, “different native nations, the Spanish and the British empires, Mexico, the Lone Star Republic, the Confederacy, various states in the US and Mexican federal systems, and local officials in places like Coahuila and Eagle Pass” over the course of the nineteenth century. The relative stability of “boundaries and spheres of influence” during the twentieth must have come as a relief for peoples so used to shifting political sands underfoot.