"Are We Not Foreigners Here?"

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In 1948, the anthropologist Edward Spicer wrote a letter to a friend, presumably an immigration official, in which he relayed an interesting story about a Kickapoo Indian named Pesiskea Matapulla. A graduate student of Spicer’s encountered Matapulla while traveling in Sonora, and Matapulla quickly volunteered a great deal of information about himself. He had been born near Shawnee, Oklahoma, to Kickapoo parents and migrated to Mexico as a child. Since then, he had visited Oklahoma only once. Matapulla was about fifty years old, the husband of a Mexican woman and the father of five. He claimed to have lost any documentation that might have confirmed either his U.S. citizenship or his affiliation with the Kickapoo tribe, however, and immigration officials repeatedly denied him reentry to the United States. Even though Matapulla occasionally received money from Oklahoma authorities in connection with his deceased father’s estate, he had been unsuccessful in convincing U.S. authorities to wave him through. He asked the graduate student for assistance in getting himself and his brother, Namarsik, across the border. Evidently, the two wished to relocate to the United States permanently. “What should Matapulla do,” Spicer asked, “to return to the United States? Could you help him in any way? If there is anything that can be done to establish his citizenship, could you get in touch with him? Does he appear in the agency records?”

Whatever became of Matapulla is unclear, but his story is emblematic of the awkward position in which transnational Kickapoos found themselves, a position made all the more awkward by increasingly rigorous efforts to control transborder traffic.

Spicer relayed the story of Matapulla in 1948. As the century progressed, the Kickapoos watched their right to migrate on a transnational scale steadily erode, much like the Yaquis. Still, contrary to what Matapulla’s story suggests, the tribe retained a remarkable degree of freedom to pass and repass the border, a degree of freedom few North American tribes enjoyed and one that required a great deal of tenacity on the tribe’s behalf to maintain. Even more so than the Yaquis, the Kickapoos exploited holes in
the immigration system and capitalized on their uncertain citizenship status and tribal affiliation, all in the interest of solidifying their hard-won transnational presence. Although the parallels between the two groups are myriad, one distinction merits mention. The Kickapoos, throughout the twentieth century, were among the most mobile indigenous groups in North America. They forged a vast migratory labor network throughout the American West, Southwest, and Midwest that covered thousands of miles; founded a sort of transborder way station literally on the northern banks of the Rio Grande that the tribe increasingly considered home; and maintained a ceremonial center, a sort of spiritual homeland, in a remote pocket of Mexico at Nacimiento, Coahuila, where Kickapoo culture and religion could flourish in the open. The tribe also hammered out an arrangement with the Mexican government in the mid-nineteenth century that not only helped secure their land base, but also specifically allowed them to preserve and practice their unique culture. Thus, unlike Mexico's other indigenous peoples, the Kickapoos did not have to live with the threat of forced assimilation. They would also prove notoriously suspicious of and resistant to any government initiative that looked like an attempt to undermine their cultural autonomy, however well-intentioned it might have been. But perhaps most significantly, while the Yaquis had essentially split into two groups, connected only by periodic sojourners, the Kickapoo tribe managed to move, with only a few exceptions, as a tribal whole, pouring into Nacimiento during the winter months, filing out en masse during the spring months, merging with and nearly disappearing into the migrant labor stream, and periodically regrouping in Eagle Pass, all the while encountering surprisingly few obstacles.

Efforts by immigration authorities to more meaningfully govern transborder traffic, however, threatened this delicate balancing act. As a case in point, in early 1966, Kickapoo Indian Pancho Salazar Garza and his brother were returning to Mexico following their annual trek to various harvests throughout the western and central United States. Prior to his departure from Mexico the previous spring, Garza had acquired a six-month tourist permit and a secondhand automobile. While in the United States he acquired a .32 automatic pistol, a nonfunctioning .22 rifle, a hunting knife, and several boxes of ammunition. Also on his person was a card, issued by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to the Mexican Kickapoos, which read as follows: “Member of the Kickapoo Indian tribe, pending clarification of status by Congress.” Stamped across this document was the word “Parolee,” a misleading classification that could, and did,
lead uninformed authorities to assume these men were somehow parolees from prison. About ten miles north of Lamesa, Texas, a highway patrol officer stopped Garza and his brother, searched their vehicle, and then promptly took them to police headquarters for interrogation.³

 Apparently, the officer had reasonable cause for suspicion. First of all, Garza claimed Mexican residency, but possessed a Utah driver’s license. He initially claimed to have been en route from Utah, but later claimed to have been working in Brownfield, Texas. Second, one of Garza’s documents, presumably his tourist visa, appeared to have been altered, the date of issuance having been changed from 1962 to 1964. Finally, the Garza brothers were unable to establish ownership of the firearms, obliging the officer to confirm whether or not they were stolen. After interrogating Garza and his brother, the officers finally confirmed both their identity and their ownership of the firearms. Authorities released Garza and his brother shortly thereafter, and for reasons that are unclear forwarded their firearms to the tribe’s attorney in Austin.⁴

 While the officer’s concerns may have been valid given the series of red flags, among officials along the border it was evidently common knowledge that the Kickapoos did, in fact, spend part of the year in Utah (where they picked cherries) and part of the year in Brownfield (where they manned the cotton harvest). They also typically harvested apples and onions in Colorado and worked the beet-thinning period in Montana and Wyoming for part of the year. Thus, Garza could accurately claim to have been en route from Utah, or Texas, or any other of the many stops along their annual migratory route. Further, it was not unusual for an American employer to assist tribal members in purchasing automobiles and acquiring driver’s licenses, since they valued their services. In this instance, while Garza was not a year-round resident of Utah, his employer, who was, took it upon himself to make sure Garza had all the proper documentation.⁵

 For much of the twentieth century, the Kickapoos participated in this seasonal migratory cycle, one that usually began in the month of May and terminated in the month of October. Only the elderly or ill stayed in Mexico, charged with caring for the tribe’s cattle, so Nacimiento could appear deserted for months at a time. Tribal members organized themselves into patrilineal family groups, with the father acting as a crew chief of sorts. They typically traveled nonstop from Mexico in camper-equipped pickup trucks, reportedly dispensing with road maps because of their knack for remembering landmarks, and carried little more than bedding, clothing, and cooking utensils.⁶ The migrants typically stayed in communal housing pro-
vided, free of charge, by the farmers. One reporter provided a detailed description of Kickapoo housing on a farm in Brighton, Colorado. It was a former dairy barn, partitioned off into several “apartments” by whitewashed plywood. The quarters contained a single window, a single lightbulb, and “fly strips thick with insects.” As for furniture, each unit contained nothing more than a few mattresses, a stove, and a refrigerator. “When it comes time to pick apples,” he said, “it’s time to go home.” Even as late as the 1980s, most Mexican Kickapoos continued to participate in the annual migration, with many expressing a general contentment.⁷

American employers were typically enthusiastic accomplices in helping the Kickapoos maintain these seasonal migratory patterns. A rancher in Big Bend colorfully expressed an attitude shared by many Kickapoo employers: “They’re the greatest barbed wire fence builders and repairers I’ve ever had. You just tell them what to do, or rather tell their leader. And they’ll start building fence like a bunch of Swedes laying railroad track.”⁸ However, although their livelihood depended on seasonal employment, the Kickapoos would not tolerate an overly demanding or unsympathetic employer, nor would they neglect their ceremonial duties for employment obligations. “Last year I was unable to go to work for you,” wrote Pancho Jiménez to George Schuman of Clearmont, Wyoming, “as you did not help me out when I wrote you for a small allowance of $40.00.” He expressed a desire to return to work for Schuman, but only if he received a sixty-dollar advance. “We do not work in the winters,” he explained, “and money gets very scarce around here about this time of the year and our employers usually give us a hand.”⁹

The anthropologist Dolores Latorre, who, along with her anthropologist husband Felipe, lived near the tribe’s Mexican settlement for several years, elaborated on the difficulties faced by Kickapoos during the winter months, difficulties stemming in part from the tribe’s ceremonial commitments. “The Kickapoos are very busy with their New Year ceremonies,” she wrote to one planter, “and there is little time left for them to attend even to the essentials of earning a living.” She described these tribal customs as “more important to them than anything else,” even making a living. Kickapoo women constructed a new winter house each year, beginning usually around November, and maintained the winter residence until the end of the New Year ceremonies, which typically corresponded with the first week of March. Next, they tore down their winter houses and then repaired and, finally, reoccupied their summer residences. “If a Kickapoo woman owns a house,” Latorre wrote, “she is duty bound to observe these rules and nothing will
keep her from carrying them out.” Meanwhile, the husband was not allowed to leave the village, even for employment, until the family had fully transitioned from the winter to the summer house. There is some evidence, however, that the Kickapoos did not entirely ignore their nonceremonial responsibilities during these periods. For example, Latorre revealed that due to some early work-related commitments among the men one season, the Kickapoos’ chief, Papikwano, was “rushing the ceremonies.” Interestingly, the Kickapoos often relied on their employers to directly fund their ceremonial observances through payday advances. “Now we have to give a fiesta for one of our relatives,” wrote Fernando Jiménez to his employer, “and we would like very much for you to advance us about $50.00 US in order that we can be able to perform that important ceremony which should be before the 12 of March.” As the Latorres once wrote to some acquaintances, “These people will do nothing until they finish their ceremonies and let’s face it!”

The Kickapoos’ letters to various employers, a great many having been written by Dolores Latorre on their behalf during the 1960s, also reveal that the tribe had a certain rapport with their bosses, a rapport that went much deeper than an employer-employee relationship and even bordered on friendship. In early 1965, Jesusita Valdes wrote a C. S. Dawson in Provo, Utah, requesting fifty dollars to pay for groceries purchased on credit. “Through Lonnie Salazar,” she wrote, “I was supposed to receive part of the money he received from you, but Lonnie drank it up, so I got nothing.” Thus, she requested that Dawson “not send the money through anyone, but send it directly to me at [Múzquiz].” Another Kickapoo, named Margarito Treviño, asked S. C. Carranza of the Holly Sugar Company in Sidney, Montana, for fifty dollars “to buy cigarettes.” Their employers evidently granted the Kickapoos’ requests more often than not, and also commonly expressed a more personal interest in their well-being. “Thank you for sending me the money I requested,” wrote Pancho Valdes. “My wife is better,” he continued, “and I hope she will be almost completely well by the time we get to your country.” John Mohawk wrote to a Mrs. Dick Burr of Provo that he and his family were fine except for his wife, who was “suffering considerably from her knee as water accumulates in it and is painful.” He requested that she fill his wife’s prescription for pain medication, sending it to Eagle Pass, since, he explained, “the Mexican customs might stop the medicine at the border like they have done for other Kickapoo.” Tribal members were also in the habit of having employers acquire their automobile license plates. They insisted, however, that plates be sent to Eagle Pass instead of Múzquiz.
in order to, in the words of one Kickapoo, “avoid customs complications.” On at least one occasion Mexican customs tried to charge a Kickapoo Indian a five dollar duty for plates shipped to Mexico, money that he did not have. He promptly returned the plates and asked his employer to reship them to an address in Eagle Pass. In addition to migrating for employment purposes, the Kickapoos also migrated to be near family. “Thank you for the $15.00 in cash which you sent me,” wrote Kiehtahmookwa, or Cecilia Jiménez, to her husband, Jim Katakyaha, who was then residing in Jones, Oklahoma. “I am feeling much better,” she continued, “and am brown as a nut from this wonderful sunshine in Mexico.” She went on to request that her husband come to Mexico and take her back to Oklahoma. She concluded, “We shall all be very glad to get back to you and our home,” suggesting that perhaps the family maintained their Mexico residence strictly for seasonal, ceremonial purposes.

The Kickapoos, thus, had a long history of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border unfettered, only occasionally encountering problems like Matapulla’s at ports of entry. If questioned by immigration authorities, at least prior to the 1950s, they simply presented to guards at border crossings copies of a document that read as follows: “This is to certify that the families of the Kickapoo Indians, thirty seven in number, are to be protected by all persons from any injury whatever, as they are under the protection of the United States and any person violating shall be punished accordingly.” A “Wm. Whittlee, Mj., 2nd Inft., Fort Dearborn” signed the document on September 28, 1832. Although there are regular references in the historical record to the Kickapoos’ knack for acquiring “passes” or “permits” from “Commanders of ports,” Indian agents, or other U.S. officials in order to remain relatively footloose and fancy-free, the 1832 document in particular became a kind of tribal institution unto itself. In fact, the tribe continued, in the words of one report, “clinging] with a childish faith to copies of a document which [they] cannot read, and which has been handed from father to son” well into the twentieth century. Border guards, meanwhile, made a habit of honoring the document, probably not so much out of a fear of being “punished accordingly,” but because they had gradually developed a familiarity with and a respect for the Kickapoos’ work habits. Whether or not the document still carried the force of law was evidently a question no one bothered to ask, though the tribe certainly considered it a treaty, negotiated government-to-government, which exempted migrant Kickapoos from immigration regulations. Thus, the tribe’s unfettered movement appears to have been an unwritten rule along the border.
Still, tribal members were careful about keeping certified copies of the document handy. In fact, one Eagle Pass notary claimed to have made at least a hundred certified copies from a copy of the original in his fifteen years in the business. One can imagine his surprise, then, when a young Kickapoo wandered into his office with the original. It was a development that, according to one report, touched off a “flurry of speculation and lightning research,” since those familiar with the document had often wondered if the original still existed. “When questioned,” the article continues, “[the Kickapoo] said his ‘abuelito’ in Nacimiento had given it to him. It was tattered and worn, and mended with cellophane tape.” The notary made the copies, but not before cautioning the young man that great care should be taken with the document. At midcentury, however, the document had been copied by both Kickapoos and non-Kickapoos alike so many times that immigration officials increasingly began calling its validity into question. Their suspicions were understandable, since, as Dolores Latorre explained, “Mexicans began to avail themselves of the many times copied document and were crossing as Kickapoos and not as Mexican nationals whose entry into the U.S. is very complicated.” And more trouble was on the horizon for Kickapoo migrants.

Under Operation Wetback, which was a 1953 legislative initiative designed to curtail undocumented Mexican migration northward, the tribe faced increasing scrutiny. For the first time, the issue of the tribe’s nationality began to preoccupy and even trouble officials within the INS. After reviewing the Kickapoo case in the mid-1950s, the INS concluded, “The Service must, on the basis of the situation known to it, take the position that Kickapoo Indians residing in Mexico are to be treated the same as other persons residing there and that they are not entitled to any special rights or privileges under the immigration and naturalization laws because of their tribal membership.” Thus, in 1957 the INS designated the Mexican Kickapoos “aliens,” which would complicate, if not completely curtail, their transborder movement. This development evoked protests from a contingent of sympathetic Eagle Pass residents, who urged their local congressman to challenge the ruling. After taking the tribe’s case to the INS in San Antonio, the local representative returned to Eagle Pass with encouraging news. After considering the Kickapoo case, the immigration service concluded, “A review of all available information would indicate the Kickapoo should be permitted to cross and recross the Mexican border.” They cited the 1794 Jay Treaty, signed by the new United States and Great Britain, which protected all Indians’ right to migrate across the U.S.-Canada bor-
der, as justification. Although local officials predicted that the INS's decision would not sit well with Congress, it ultimately went unchallenged.\textsuperscript{23}

The invocation of the Jay Treaty may seem anachronistic and, given its focus on the U.S.-Canada border, irrelevant. Article 3 of the treaty states, “It shall at all times be free to His Majesty’s subjects, and to the citizens of the United States, and also to Indians dwelling on either side of the said boundary line, to freely pass and repass by land or inland navigation, in the respective territories and countries of the two parties on the continent of America.” The United States and Great Britain reaffirmed the provisions of the Jay Treaty in the 1796 Explanatory Article in the wake of the Treaty of Greenville. In fact, it mentioned the Kickapoos, at this time only precariously established in the Great Lakes region, by name. Along the U.S.-Canada border, Indians passed freely until the 1924 Immigration Act. After its passage, immigration officials in the United States required Canadian Indians to register as aliens and obtain immigrant visas or else face deportation proceedings. A few years later, and in the wake of a series of legal challenges, officials adopted a provision stating that the 1924 act “shall not be construed to apply to the right of American Indians born in Canada to pass the borders of the United States; \textit{Provided}, that this right shall not extend to persons whose membership to Indian tribes or families is created by adoption.” The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act altered this provision somewhat, establishing a 50 percent blood quantum requirement for those claiming an exemption from the usual rules governing immigration.\textsuperscript{24} Still, taken collectively, these developments seemingly affirmed, in a somewhat convoluted manner, the Kickapoos’ right to traverse the northern border at will, so long as they could prove tribal membership. The question remains, though, if the Jay Treaty applies to the southern border, as the Kickapoo claimed. The legal scholar Richard Osburn argues that while “Indian interaction between tribes separated by America’s northern border is safe,” along the southern border it is not, with the exception of the Kickapoos and Tohono O’odham (with the latter experiencing somewhat less freedom than the former, especially in recent years). These exceptions, however, have nothing to do with the Jay Treaty and everything to do with those anomalous aspects of their histories discussed herein, including, especially, historical precedent.\textsuperscript{25}

At midcentury, the INS implemented a new system designed to govern the tribe’s movements in a more formal fashion, one that was more “official” in nature but still comparatively lax. They began issuing the Kickapoos what immigration officials called “annual parolee papers,” which
migrant tribal members had to renew from year to year. “Paroling Kickapoos,” one official clarified, “is an immigration term. It’s not a criminal thing. The Immigration Department is not sure of the citizenship of these Indians.” According to the enrollment records of the Oklahoma Kickapoos from this period, about half of their Mexican counterpart was likely born in the United States, an understandable figure given the fact that the tribe spent most of the year migrating within U.S. borders. However, few Mexican Kickapoos bothered to record births, partly because the tribe had never considered such official documentation important and partly because of a characteristic reluctance to register themselves anywhere. Thus, for decades their citizenship status remained unclear, and mostly by design. Until officials clarified that status, they had little choice but to consider the Kickapoos American citizens when in the United States and Mexican citizens when in Mexico—a far from ideal arrangement unless you were a Kickapoo.26

Migrating Kickapoos considered themselves, variously, either dual citizens or citizens of neither country. A 1957 INS study included a telling conclusion that perhaps best summed up the Kickapoos’ sentiments. “It is a consensus,” the report contended, “that the Kickapoo consider their tribe a nation unto itself.” When uninformed authorities forcibly detained Kickapoo migrants, as in the Garza case, the official response could be surprisingly swift. For example, in the 1960s, an immigration official asked a Kickapoo from Múzquiz, who was attempting to cross into Mexico, for his papers. Since the Kickapoo was unable to produce sufficient proof of his citizenship status, authorities detained him. “The U.S. government was informed of this,” reported a journalist from Eagle Pass, “and there was a tremendous fuss in Washington. They even sent a high immigration official from Washington to the Texas border.” Oddly, that same official seized the reporter’s file on the Kickapoos, in what was likely an attempt to keep the incident out of the news.27 Evidently, the U.S. government, as surprising as it may be, had no objection to tribal members asserting their right to migrate, a right that, at least from the tribe’s perspective, went back to 1832.

The Kickapoos also enjoyed a host of notable legal and political exceptions while living in Mexico. First of all, the Mexican government recognized the tribe’s right to govern itself. The Kickapoos’ government has traditionally consisted of a “chief,” or capitán, who serves as the civil, political, and religious leader of the group, and, at least until the late 1930s, when they evidently stopped meeting, a council of elders that worked closely with the chief. Mexican officials have historically interfered with the work-
ings of the Kickapoo government only when serious crimes were committed, such as manslaughter, robbery, and cattle rustling. Government officials also excluded the tribe from several national censuses. They counted the Kickapoos for the 1930 and 1970 censuses, but not for those conducted in 1940, 1950, 1960, or 1980. Their exclusion was apparently at the urging of local officials, who were uncertain whether or not the tribe could properly be considered Mexican citizens, since, put simply, they were not treated as Mexican citizens, particularly when it came to the favoritism they received at border crossings. Immigration officials also did not inspect their vehicles upon their return from the United States, nor did they require that the Kickapoos pay duties on items brought back from the United States. Finally, the Mexican government did not require that tribal members register their vehicles in Mexico. The Kickapoos honored the terms of their arrangement with the Mexican government, and Mexican officials, in turn, allowed their very unusual relationship to persist.

This is not to imply, however, that the Mexican government ignored the Kickapoos when it came to broader discussions of Indian assimilation, discussions that, as detailed earlier, had become commonplace by mid-century. For example, writing in the 1960s for an official publication, the anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla lumped the Mexican Kickapoos together with other Mexican tribes, including the Yaqui and Tohono O’odham, that he considered among the least acculturated of Mexico’s Indians, or those who had witnessed only “sporadic attempts to raise their living conditions or to scientifically study their [language].” However, he nonetheless considered the Kickapoos a special case. He explained, “Note should be taken, as a case of almost complete isolation, of the Kikapoo [sic] group that lives on the ‘ranchería’ ‘El Nacimiento,’ located in the Municipality of Múzquiz, Coahuila.” Unlike other Mexican Indian groups, he continued, the Kickapoos “form a part, from an ethnic and linguistic point of view, of the Algonquin family” from the United States, and had only comparatively recently established a presence in Mexico. Still, although León-Portillo differentiated the Kickapoos from other Mexican Indians, he did not imply that this distinction meant anything when it came to the question of acculturation. In other words, Indigenistas would not exempt the Kickapoos from their nationalizing project. He also singled out the Mexican O’odham as a special case. “It should be explained,” he wrote, “that the Papagos, located near the U.S. border where there are also individuals of said group, receive certain influence from the United States, principally because some of their children attend Papago reservation schools in the state of Arizona.” Yet again, however,
he did not imply that their unusual history and/or orientation exempted them from the Indigenistas’ larger mission to acculturate Indians living within Mexico’s borders.\(^30\)

Regardless, Mexican policy as applied to the Kickapoos has generally been one of noninterference, leaving them with considerably more autonomy than their Oklahoma relatives. And much as in the Yaqui case, the Cárdenas administration had a lot to do with institutionalizing this hands-off approach to managing the tribe’s presence. In yet another presidential decree, Cárdenas “officially” recognized Papiquano and Minonina as chiefs of the Kickapoo tribe, and in 1939 he amended the decree, directing that their hunting rights be recognized without the oversight and interference of government authorities. They were permitted to hunt, unfettered by federal or state hunting laws, in the Sierra Madre nine months out of the year. It further allocated a small salary for the tribal chief from the Mexican government (though successive leaders appear not to have received the same perk). Evidently, however, the tribe was not entirely comfortable with the sudden attention from Mexico City, and tribal elders, in turn, strongly discouraged tribal members from participating in Mexican politics and elections, fearing that doing so might make them vulnerable to an erosion of their rights and incursions on their lands. And unfortunately for the Kickapoos, the agreement struck with Cárdenas regarding hunting rights did not outlive his presidency. Over time the wilderness on their perimeters was subdivided and doled out as \textit{ejidos} and ranches. The non-Indians who worked these parcels, not surprisingly, had little interest in the Indians’ historic agreement with the Mexican government. President Carlos Salinas was the first to flat-out ignore the Kickapoos’ hunting rights, and although they reached out to successive presidents to right these wrongs, as one Kickapoo put it, “Es perdido.” It’s lost.\(^31\)

The hunting rights issue may seem to be a minor one, but the Kickapoos considered it a serious affront to the tribe’s religious freedom. Put simply, the deer hunt is a sacred activity. As one journalist explained later in the twentieth century, “A father cannot baptize and bestow a tribal name on an infant unless he can contribute to the rite four slain deer.” The animals were scarce around Nacimiento and “rare as polar bears” in Eagle Pass. Hunting regulations imposed by both private landowners and government officials became increasingly restrictive by the end of the century south of the border, and in Texas these restrictions were “unrelenting.” With most Kickapoos earning only a few thousand dollars a year by century’s end, few could afford seasonal hunting leases. Besides, a hunting lease would not
have fully addressed the problem anyway. After all, babies are born year round, and leaving them nameless was simply not an option. Many Kickapoos thus turned to poaching, but were likewise unable to pay fines that could run into hundreds of dollars when caught. Thus, many ended up working these fines off on county road gangs.\textsuperscript{32}

Still, relations between the Kickapoos and Mexican local and national officials have mostly been comparatively positive. One notable exception, however, concerned education. Efforts to provide a non-Indian education to the Kickapoos were rarely well received. In the early 1920s, for example, the administration of Alvaro Obregón installed a school and a teacher at Nacimiento. Fearing the impact that a non-Indian education could have on their culture, the Kickapoos burned down the school and purged their community of all government agents. Federal officials reached out to the Kickapoos again later that decade, and this time enjoyed the smallest of victories. After refusing a federal educator’s request that they send five of their children to the aforementioned Casa del Estudiante Indígena boarding school in Mexico City, the Kickapoos, evidently trying to meet the officials halfway, agreed to allow a leatherworking specialist and an agricultural adviser to settle among them. President Cárdenas also tried to bring the Kickapoos into the Mexican educational system. In a meeting with Cárdenas in 1938, however, Kickapoo chief Papiquano advised, “I am the head of my people; you are the head of yours. I don’t interfere with you; you don’t interfere with me.” The Kickapoos’ recalcitrance when it came to education persisted throughout the twentieth century. “As of the 1980s,” the historian Andrae Marak observed, “only the parents of about twelve Mexican Kickapoo children were sending their children to school for fear that the education offered in Mexico (or in the United States for that matter) would lead to their children’s acculturation.”\textsuperscript{33}

All the while, the Mexican counterpart of the Kickapoo tribe maintained a rather curious relationship with their Oklahoma relatives. The boundary between the two contingents actually remained quite diffuse throughout the twentieth century. Intermarriages were not uncommon; movement between the two locales was, of course, common; and it was actually relatively easy, though evidently uncommon, for a Kickapoo to “switch” from one group to another. Ceremonial visits to Mexico and Oklahoma from both sides were a constant, and a layover in Oklahoma while on the migratory trail was similarly common.\textsuperscript{34} Yet barriers between the two Kickapoo contingents remained. Although the two groups always considered themselves products of the same tribal heritage, both recognized that those residing
south of the border were considerably more culturally conservative. Then there was the fact that in 1937, under John Collier’s Indian Reorganization Act, the Oklahoma Kickapoos adopted a form of government and constitution that their southern counterpart found somewhat stifling. Mexican agrarian law classified the Mexican Kickapoos’ land as an ejido, a much less formal, looser designation that left the Kickapoos with considerably more freedom to govern themselves within their communally held lands as they saw fit. The ejido organization required only that the Kickapoos elect a jefe, or president, a treasurer, and a secretary, all serving three-year terms. Other positions included a judge, a post often held, at least among the Kickapoos, by a religious leader, and a consejo de vigilancia, or investigator, who dealt with livestock and other economic matters. Although the ejido organization sounds quite formal, the Kickapoos’ broad interpretation of these requirements and posts left it considerably less so. Thus, they enjoyed a degree of freedom and independence that, at least in their estimation, their Oklahoma counterpart did not.\(^{35}\)

The status of Kickapoo lands in Mexico, in fact, seemed to have gradually evolved over time in a way that granted the tribe even more freedom and independence. The Kickapoos’ original designation upon their arrival was that of a “military colony,” a classification that carried with it much less government interference than ejido, and thus more autonomy. Military colonies, however, have obviously become a thing of the past. Mexican officials have also, at times, referred to Kickapoo lands in Mexico as comprising a ranchería, a designation that carries with it economic connotations. But ejidos, which are still fairly common arrangements in Mexico, bring with them the maximum amount of autonomy available under contemporary Mexican law. In fact, the ejido distinction has throughout Mexican history been an exemption, and even a privilege, reserved, generally speaking, for Indian communities that possess some preexisting governing structure. However, although the Kickapoos’ status, officially speaking, remained that of an ejido for most of the twentieth century, their original “military colony” designation, which implies an even greater degree of autonomy, may have more accurately reflected the reality. In fact, the Latorres gleaned that because of a failure to “comprehend the complicated laws” surrounding these various designations, some Kickapoos were under the impression that at least part of their lands still had antiquated colonia status under the Mexican government and thus considered themselves an “autonomous nation.”\(^{36}\)

Descriptions of Nacimiento by outsiders have tended to emphasize the freedom and splendid solitude in which the group evidently lived. A traveler
later in the twentieth century recounted seeing a few houses made of cinder blocks, but “the dominant architecture was the traditional loaf-shaped wickiups made of cattail reeds.” He observed the Kickapoos going about their daily activities, some strolling about, some reclining on straw cots under front porches, some clumped into groups engaging in conservation, all seemingly in a state of relaxation. It was “a scene of leisure,” he wrote. The village itself, he noted, was surrounded by “dramatic rock cliffs” and mountains blanketed with oaks. It also boasted a stream, running cool and clear through the small cluster of houses and buildings. When asked if the “sacred stream” had a name, one Kickapoo replied, “No. We just call it river.” As of the late twentieth century, the village did not have water pipes or a sewage system. In fact, electricity had only recently arrived in Nacimiento. The Kickapoo evidently were not looking to significantly alter this pattern of life. As one explained, “Texas is where we work. Nacimiento is where we go to live our lives as Kickapoo people.”

A third Kickapoo contingent, it should be added, resided in the state of Kansas, though in dwindling numbers. Originally established in 1832 and consisting of roughly 768,000 acres, the Kansas reservation had been subjected to allotment in 1887 and had dwindled to just under 4,000 acres of allotted land and just under 1,000 acres of tribal land by the end of the 1930s. The Kickapoo Tribe of Kansas organized under the auspices of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934. As of 1962, the tribal roll listed 498 persons. In just seven years that number had fallen to 250 (though Bureau of Indian Affairs officials believed the number was more like 1,000, and were working with Kansas Kickapoos to produce a more accurate count). They appear to have been left to their own devices by their relatives, however. “I’ve been waiting a long time for a Kickapoo from Oklahoma or Mexico to come up to Kansas,” one told a reporter in 1973, “but none of the southern Kickapoos ever come to this part of the country.” The result was that the Kansas Kickapoo had lost “nearly all” of their Kickapoo culture. It is unclear why tribal members bypassed Kansas, since the Mexican Kickapoos were known to venture as far north as Michigan to visit even more distant relatives.

Those Kickapoos who permanently resided in the United States and enjoyed federally protected status often expressed and even acted upon an interest in strengthening ties with their Mexican counterparts. Yet their efforts did not always sit well with their southern relatives. In the 1960s, for example, Oklahoma Kickapoos initiated a drive to add Kickapoos in Mexico to their tribal rolls. Although motivated in part by the Oklahoma
Kickapoos’ desire to receive the maximum amount of compensation for tribal lands lost earlier in the century, the enrollment drive may also have represented a sincere effort to help their relatives, then widely perceived as poverty-stricken and uneducated. The Latorres appear to have assisted the tribe in its efforts, claiming to have been, in Dolores’s words, “up to our necks in work” in the process. Two representatives from the Oklahoma group visited Mexico in 1966, but managed to sign up only a “handful” of Mexican Kickapoos. The Latorres then took over. After a few days the Latorres had forty-nine signatures on applications for enrollment in the Kickapoo tribe of Oklahoma. However, the pair ran into a couple of serious obstacles. First of all, only a few Kickapoo children had birth certificates, namely, those who were born in the United States while their parents were on the migratory trail. Second, few could remember if they had already registered in 1937, when the tribe last formulated a tribal roll. A comparison of the current membership roll with the 1937 roll helped the Latorres solve the latter problem, which left only the birth certificate problem. They proposed a compromise with the BIA whereby, in lieu of a birth certificate, they would send an affidavit signed by two other tribal members confirming the individual’s Kickapoo identity. The BIA, in the end, agreed to this somewhat unusual request. The Latorres also assisted officials in estimating the age of tribal members, which proved to be no small task. Dolores explained:

We have developed several “tricks” for estimating the ages of the Kickapoo by combining their personal estimation of their age (some actually know the exact date of their birth) plus certain historical “landmarks” such as the year they arrived in Mexico, McKenzie’s raid, the coming of the Kickapoo group who arrived in 1907, the Mexican Revolution, “la gran gripa” (1918 Influenza epidemic), the big drought of the 50’s when they began going stateside to work, etc. Then by asking them such personal questions as: “Were you a ‘señorita’ (had your menarche) when the flu epidemic came?” Or, “were you married when such or such an event occurred?” etc., we finally can approximate the age of a person within four or five years.

However, the Latorres also encountered resistance from within the Mexican band, with one member confiding to Dolores her fear that enrolling in the Oklahoma tribe, in Dolores’s words, “will mean that the Kickapoo from here have to return to the U.S. where their ways will be taken away from them as was tried before they came here.” The tribe’s distrust of the BIA
also figured into their reluctance to register, even when the agency acted through fellow Kickapoos. After personally distributing BIA-produced applications to tribal members per the Latorres’ request, Kickapoo Pancho Minacoa privately revealed that even he was afraid of “esa gente,” or “those people.”42 The fact was that at the end of the day the Mexican Kickapoos trusted no one. Mexican authorities typically got the cold shoulder, the tribe repeatedly refused to allow church officials on their lands, and, as already discussed, they burned down two schools that the Mexican Department of Education constructed in their village earlier in the century.43 Thus, their resistance to these latest overtures surprised no one, and the Latorres’ efforts to register the Mexican Kickapoos, though well meaning, appear to have yielded little fruit.

Relations between the Oklahoma and Mexican groups, however, could also be quite positive. One Mexican Kickapoo, for example, extended an invitation to his Oklahoma-based brother-in-law to visit Mexico. “Would be very happy to have you come down to Mexico in February,” he wrote, “but it is best if you come all the way to Muzquiz by bus as every time we cross the border, the Mexican customs make us pay $15.00 to get our cars back into Mexico.” And in an interesting aside, the Kickapoo also promised to send his Oklahoma relative some peyote.44 Mexican Kickapoos also remained bound to their Oklahoma counterpart for more pragmatic reasons. The availability of welfare checks, for example, depended on at least their periodic presence north of the border. Writing to Kickapoo Palo Trevino, the Oklahoma Department of Public Welfare warned that its policy allowed only two successive checks to be mailed to out-of-state addresses. The letter continues, “This means you may receive your February and March checks in Mexico, but you must return to Oklahoma by April 1st, to avoid a change in your welfare grant.”45 Another Kickapoo, forced onto disability due to an undisclosed medical condition, stood to receive aid to the disabled from the state of Oklahoma for the rest of his life, but with an important condition. “Our concern at present,” a representative from the Shawnee Agency wrote to the Latorres, “is that [his wife] will not realize that he cannot be out of the state of Oklahoma for a period of more than three months and still maintain residence or eligibility for financial assistance.” The agency requested the Latorres’ assistance in stressing to tribal members that they must not remain in Mexico for longer than three months, lest the checks from Oklahoma cease.46

Despite occasional headaches, however, many Kickapoos appear to have valued their freedom, independence, and splendid isolation, whether at
home in Nacimiento or on the migrant trail. Tribal member Aurelio García explained: “The Kickapoo are different than most American Indians. Most have their reservations. They stay there. Nowhere to go. These people, the Kickapoo, are free, like birds or whatever . . . They feel like they can go anywhere.”47 Another Kickapoo echoed this sentiment, telling a reporter in the 1980s: “I don’t like staying in one place too long. I get bored. I had a steady job in Oklahoma City. But I got tired of it.” Much of the migrant work, he maintained, was temporary, easy, and lucrative. For example, harvesting asparagus, which required them to work only a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the evening, earned them up to $800 a week. He and his family typically stayed in communal housing provided, free of charge, by the farmers. While in Mexico, they inhabited housing some would consider substandard, but not the Kickapoo. They designed their winter homes to allow for quick assembly and disassembly, making their migratory lifestyle all the more convenient to maintain. “I just want to leave it that way,” he concluded. “I don’t want to change. Indians are not made to be rich . . . We work, pay taxes, that’s it.”48

It should be pointed out, however, that not all Kickapoos found life on the migrant trail fulfilling. As Kickapoo Margie Salazar put it in the 1990s: “As a child, I remember traveling with my parents on long difficult journeys. I worked in the fields, and we all chipped in to survive, but I knew there would be a better life. I worked very hard between trips to get my education and complete my GED. I did not want to keep working with my hands.” Another Kickapoo mentioned having turned to migrant labor only reluctantly, and only when he was unable to secure a job as a roofer, his occupation of choice.49

Regardless, their wages, in addition to providing subsistence, also funded ceremonial observances and a host of social obligations. This was no small matter, since the tribe believed that following through on their religious commitments protected not just the Kickapoos but the entire human race from calamity. As one Kickapoo put it: “A Kickapoo does not pray for himself alone. He prays for all people. And if Kickapoo are not allowed to practice their traditions, this will be borne out in wars, disease, natural disasters.”50 According to one journalist, the Kickapoos believed they were living in the last of four worlds. He explained: “The first three were destroyed by air, rot, and water; this one will be consumed by fire. But their faith seems to be largely free of apocalyptic fret and doom. As long as they observe the tradition and conduct their lives honorably, at peace with nature, they will have an eternal reward in the western sky.” Indeed, nature
figured prominently in their ceremonial cycle. The springtime ceremonial season begins after two annual rites: the second thunderstorm of the spring season and the blooming of a specific species of tree. At that moment, the journalist added, “the tribe's spiritual leader summons the people, and at Nacimiento the holy season begins. For several weeks Nacimiento is closed to anyone who is not Kickapoo.” Overall, however, it was impossible to partition off religion from other aspects of Kickapoo culture. One Kickapoo religious leader likened their culture to a human hand in which religion represented but one finger. Though significant on its own, it was very much interrelated with and dependent on other aspects of Kickapoo culture and, thus, impossible to isolate in its own category.\textsuperscript{51}

Also important from the Mexican Kickapoos’ perspective was the fact that their demanding migratory/ceremonial cycle enabled them to remain largely aloof from outside cultural influences. “Kickapoos Almost Immune to Change,” claimed a 1977 headline from the \textit{Austin American-Statesman}. “Kickapoos Are Living 400 Years in the Past,” declared another. One article detailed a Kickapoo burial ceremony, whereby tribal members painted a purple streak across the face of the deceased so that his god, Pepazce, would recognize him. After placing him in a shallow grave, they left the deceased Kickapoo with a corn cake and the following words: “Go willingly to Pepazce; do not molest those of us who stay behind.” The village then entered into a four-day period of mourning. The reporter marveled that, no, this was not Western historical fiction. “It is fact and still occurs only five or six hours’ driving time from Austin near the Mexican town of Muzquiz in Coahuila,” he wrote. He added that the tribe’s original agreement with the government of Mexico, made the previous century and mentioned above, included a provision that read, “It is not demanded of them (the Indians) to change their habits and customs.”\textsuperscript{52}

But although subtle, changes were occurring. Less than a decade later, a headline read, “Kickapoo Indians Launch Longest Journey—Move into Modern Life.” The purchase of automobiles and transistor radios became more common. Some Kickapoo young women began getting permanents and wearing nail polish. Some Kickapoo young men began wearing their hair in a style reminiscent of the Beatles. Younger tribal members also began studying the English language in increasing numbers. The tribe also began turning to modern medicine more frequently, particularly when it began to look like their medicine men were failing them. Still, their suspicion of outsiders remained. For example, the tribe turned down an offer of $100 per man per day, plus expenses, to appear in a Jimmy Stewart picture being filmed near
Brackettville, Texas, most likely because of a preference to steer clear of such publicity.\textsuperscript{53}

As mentioned above, the city of Eagle Pass, which is about ninety miles from Múzquiz, figured prominently in the Kickapoos’ migratory cycle. While living with other tribal members beneath the international bridge in Eagle Pass, one Kickapoo reportedly told a journalist, “The Indian was here in Eagle Pass before it was a town.” Indeed, they had been crossing the border near the present-day site of the city since at least 1848, when they camped out in the area just prior to their move to Mexico, and used the area as a crossing point for the remainder of the century. Immigration officials noted their appearance as early as 1862. In more recent decades, they have lived in cardboard huts while there, paid about eight dollars each month for water, and often bathed in the muddy Rio Grande. As of the 1980s, the tribe had some forty-nine dwellings that they built themselves, along with three trailer homes that, all told, covered about two and a half acres. The huts, one anthropologist noted, were “generally built out of a combination
of saplings, scrap lumber, cardboard, and sheets of black plastic, all held together by strips of the trimmed salvages [sic] of denim obtained from the local Wrangler jeans factory.” On more than one occasion, several huts burned because of cigarette butts or burning matches carelessly tossed out of a car window by passersby. At one point a freak flood washed away most of the tribal members’ personal belongings. Local assistance in these kinds of cases was usually not forthcoming. “One less Indian to worry about, says the government” seemed to be the consensus, according to one Kickapoo. Such attitudes were perhaps not surprising, considering the fact that most Americans recognized the Kickapoos only through the popular *L’il Abner* comic strip, which included a Kickapoo character named Lonesome Polecat. His pastime was the production of a beverage called Kickapoo Joy Juice, an alcoholic concoction.

Over time, however, the Kickapoos’ ties to Eagle Pass became more and more substantial, and they reached a point where formalizing their
presence in the city became yet another tribal imperative. The 1960s and 1970s would find the increasingly Texas-based Kickapoos pursuing formal recognition as an American Indian tribe and petitioning for a protected land base in their adopted home. In explaining their choice of Eagle Pass for the site of a potential Kickapoo reservation, one Kickapoo stated, “We refer to Eagle Pass because our grandparents and our forefathers are buried there. This is why we refer to that as our home ground.” “Our forefathers came from the United States,” another later told a congressional committee, “and we like the United States and are proud of the fact that we originated from here.”

The tribe had evidently grown tired of the uncertainties that came with camping beneath the international bridge between stops along the migrant trail, and their transience was exacting an obvious toll. “The Kickapoo Tribe, Mexicans and North Americans at the Same Time,” read a 1979 Mexican headline. The article characterized the group as “dead and forgotten, without a house or a home,” facing their “inevitable extinction, which will probably occur within the next decade, more or less.”

Such a lifestyle, as can be imagined, did not help persistent problems within the tribe, including alcoholism and a general lack of access to adequate health care. Still, they seemed to fear eviction from their Eagle Pass encampment above all other concerns. As one Kickapoo revealed, “Every day we go to bed with fears that tomorrow we are going to be thrown out of there.”

In the 1960s, the city of Eagle Pass granted the tribe a small piece of land, partly out of a concern for their safety and partly to keep them from being a nuisance. Like the Yaquis, the Kickapoos used the land to establish a variant stream of tribal tradition, a reconstituted tribal whole that drew from a specific indigenous heritage while adapting it to their new setting. Also like the Yaquis, they launched a campaign for federally recognized status to secure the greatest possible degree of sovereignty. In short, they had officially begun nation building. Also like the Yaquis, however, they faced a serious obstacle in that they were claiming the right to nationhood in a region in which they were relatively recent arrivals. In other words, they were, in the eyes of many legislators, “Mexican” Indians seeking to become “American,” or, perhaps more accurately, “Texas” Indians, even though they had actually originated well north of the present-day U.S.-Mexico border. These were all distinctions, however, that the Indians themselves simply refused to recognize. Like the Yaquis, the Kickapoos had long behaved as at least a nascent nation. Further, their unusual relationship with the Mexican government meant that they had grown accustomed to a certain degree
of autonomy (along with a host of associated protections) and no doubt wanted—or perhaps even expected—the United States to honor the precedent set by its southern neighbor and legislate accordingly. Doing so, however, would be tantamount to ignoring over a century’s worth of efforts to invest the U.S.-Mexico border with legal, diplomatic, and even cultural meaning, since a “special” relationship with the nation-states on both sides of the dividing line would effectively place the Kickapoos above the fray in their efforts to protect the border’s hard-won integrity. And again similar to the Yaqui case, recognition north of the border could pose potentially troubling questions about national citizenship that might redirect broader conversations about indigenous nationalism and indigenous borders down troubling paths. In both regards, then, it looked like a potentially slippery slope. But although the Kickapoos’ push for federally recognized status in the 1980s would appear rather audacious, to the tribal members themselves it was simply the logical next step in substantiating what they innately viewed as a perfectly legitimate claim to nationhood.