More than two decades into the black exodus from the rural South, a U.S. federal government photographer captured images of African Americans bending over to pick cotton in the Mississippi heat (fig. 4). For this photographer and other liberals in the 1930s, the image of black people toiling in cotton fields evoked hundreds of years of racial oppression, from slavery through the failures of Reconstruction and the horrors of lynching and Jim Crow.¹ These photos and hundreds like them entered the official U.S. archival record through the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography project, alongside a few dozen others that depicted a different group at work in the same Mississippi fields: “Mexican seasonal labor, contracted for by planters” (fig. 5). Though just one photograph, taken in a plantation store, included blacks and Mexicans in the same frame (fig. 6), images of the two groups in the fields echoed each other, depicting workers chopping and picking cotton, then loading it onto large flatbed trucks.²

Taken for a national audience, the photos were meant to evoke white viewers’ sympathy for poor black agricultural laborers in the South, a region notoriously abusive to them. The limited visual evidence of Mexicans’ lives showed them in the same predicament as blacks, and had the photos been taken in the 1910s or 1920s, the impression would have been largely correct. But at the time of their creation in 1939, the photos’ similarities were misleading: though they picked cotton in the same fields, by that year Mexicanos in the Mississippi Delta were well on their way to a fate distinct from that of African Americans.

From the 1910s through the 1930s, tens of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who initially lived in Texas moved on to the rural black–white South. Unlike their counterparts in New Orleans, who hailed from a range of economic backgrounds, Mexican migrants to the rural South had only their physical labor to sell to crew leaders, plantation managers, and companies.

They mined aluminum in Bauxite, Arkansas, worked in the lumber industries of rural Mississippi and Louisiana, and loaded coal in Floyd County, Kentucky. By far the largest group traveled to pick the cotton that grew from the rich soils of the Yazoo-Mississippi River Delta: some to Louisiana and Arkansas but most to the Mississippi River’s eastern banks in the state of Mississippi (see map 3).

The migration started in the 1910s and grew quickly in the early 1920s, peaking in 1925; most who came in those early years stayed for just a few months at a time, arriving in early fall to pick cotton and returning to Texas or Mexico by winter. Yet throughout those years, some Mexicanos pursued social and economic progress by staying in the Delta year-round or nearly year-round as sharecroppers who worked the full cotton cycle from planting in the spring through chopping in the summer and picking in the fall. Newspapers and word of mouth soon exposed Texas’s Mexicanos to the exploitative potential of laboring in the Delta on a short-term contract, and those who traveled there after 1925 were much more likely to insist on a sharecropping arrangement.
and remain year-round with their families. But for the Depression, in fact, Mississippi might have become a significant destination for Mexicano families to settle in the 1930s–60s, the period between the start of large-scale African American out-migration and the widespread adoption of the mechanical cotton picker. Even during the economically difficult 1930s, small numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans remained in the Delta or continued to travel there seasonally from Texas, as the FSA photographs showed.

While Mexican immigrants to New Orleans occupied a racial position alongside European immigrants in the 1910s and successfully clung to it thereafter, those who worked just a few hundred miles away in the Delta arrived to the opposite side of the color line. From the moment recruiters’ trucks delivered them to their new work sites, Mexicanos in Mississippi tasted the brutality and exclusion that the region’s white planters had used to segregate, terrorize, and control African Americans; many Mexicanos had experienced similar abuses in South Texas. Like African Americans, and like Mexicanos in the Southwest, Mississippi’s Mexicanos found refuge in their families and religious practices and forged community however they could. They fought against racial and economic oppression in their daily lives or fled to new places. But they also used a political and legal strategy unique among these groups: they appealed first and foremost to the cross-border and cross-class nationalism of the Mexican government and its consulate in New Orleans, rather than the institutions, lawyers, and liberal discourses of U.S. citizenship. They battled most intensely from 1925 through 1930, the period when many envisioned a future in the Delta. And though most left the area during the Depression, those who remained at long last reaped the fruits of these labors: they forced local officials to admit them to the privileges of whiteness, decisively separating their futures from those of the region’s African Americans and paving the way for their families’ advancement into the white middle class.

Solving the “Question of Common Labor in the South”

From the moment of blacks’ emancipation and particularly in times of their out-migration, rural southern plantation owners and managers had fantasized about importing immigrants to their fields. As they watched their human property become free people, southern planters sought out Chinese workers rather than confront the newfound need to actually negotiate the terms of employment with blacks. “To bring coolie labor in competition with negro labor—to let the negroes see that laborers can be had without them—is the main feature of the plan,” explained a reporter in 1865. But Chinese were un-
willing to work on planters’ terms and quickly left the plantations; those that remained in the area opened small grocery stores rather than pick cotton. In the 1880s–90s, southern planters, still unable to exert total control over the lives of African American laborers, tried to attract Italian immigrants. The Italians did arrive, but once again, the “experiment” with immigrant labor yielded conflict and controversy. Planters’ hopes of attracting a permanent and pliant immigrant workforce remained mere fantasies, leaving them dependent on poor African American and white cotton pickers.

Mexicans briefly took their place as desired immigrants in the cotton fields in 1904–5 and worked in the lumber industry in south-central Mississippi as early as 1908. They, too, proved unwilling to tolerate the region’s abusive conditions, and nearly all left the area. The small handful that remained in Mississippi or came there in the early years of the Mexican Revolution attracted little attention and encouraged few in Mexican America to follow their routes. The Los Angeles newspaper published in Spanish by exiled Mexican revolutionary Ricardo Flores Magón pointed to the plight of Mexican immigrants in the South as evidence of the evils of “Yankee capitalism.” “How have Mexican workers been treated in the United States?” asked a 1912 article in Regeneración. “Worse than the blacks. . . . It pierces the heart and makes the blood boil to see the lives of our brothers in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Seeing the treatment that is given to Mexican workers in the South and witnessing how they are humiliated and degraded makes us shed tears and yearn for vengeance.” While this image of “the South” helped Regeneración critique U.S. exploitation of Mexican workers, in practice the Mexican Revolution led Louisiana and Mississippi planters to briefly lose interest in Mexican worker recruitment. Meanwhile, Mexicanos in Texas faced extreme retaliatory violence at the hands of Anglos.

Though white planters had complained of “labor shortages” since Emancipation, World War I gave their anxieties renewed urgency. Cotton production in the Delta had increased dramatically in the years preceding the war, just as African Americans headed north. To resist the flight of their black labor force to military posts and northern industrial jobs, planters pressured draft officials, attacked northbound African Americans at train stations, and, in one case, closed down pool halls in an attempt to force black workers back into the fields. The federal government intermittently supported their efforts, approving of “work-or-fight” orders that all men not enlisted in the army pick cotton or go to jail and creating the U.S. Employment Service to ensure that adequate labor was available in rural areas. Soon, planters appealed to the U.S. federal government to help them secure a new labor source: Mexican
immigrants. Like the Louisiana sugar planters described in Chapter 1, Yazoo-
Mississippi Delta cotton planters asked the federal government to foot the
bill for the importation of Mexican laborers during World War I. With hopes
that up to 5,000 Mexican workers could “Solve [the] Question of Common
Labor in the South,” a federal labor official invited 300 Arkansas farmers to
attend a New Orleans meeting about the promise of Mexican labor for the
region’s rural areas in 1918. The federal government, however, would not
contract Mexicans to the Delta in large numbers until the late 1940s under
the auspices of the bracero program, as the next chapter will detail.

The end of World War I did not bring an end to Delta planters’ despera-
tion for labor. High wartime cotton prices allowed many African Americans
to buy cars, increasing their mobility and control over their own lives and
labors. They continued streaming north and west to industrial jobs while
those who stayed behind had more leverage negotiating the terms of work.
Agricultural managers on larger plantations preferred to hire wage laborers
whom they could supervise closely, but African Americans usually insisted
on sharecropping, an arrangement in which the workers lived on a plot of
land that they also planted, tended, and harvested. Their payment was half
the crop at the end of the season. Forced to buy their goods and sell their
cotton on the plantation rather than the open market, most sharecroppers
barely subsisted after paying back their annual debts. Still, they preferred this
arrangement to wage labor because it gave them marginally more autonomy,
and plantation owners found themselves forced to accept it. When African
Americans organized to improve the terms of sharecropping in the 1920s,
white planters and vigilantes responded with violence. Others turned to il-
legal debt peonage and convict leasing, in which real or trumped-up debts
and fines were used to force men to work against their will. This violence in
turn made African Americans more determined to leave the area. Planters
who abused their workers might wake up one morning in January to find that
“their Negroes” had left for a different plantation after cashing out the season’s
crop. Thus, though the federal government did not sponsor a major Mexi-
can labor importation program in these years, Delta planters continued their
quest for a more “cooperative” labor force and tried again to recruit Mexicans.

Out of Texas: The Meanings of Mexicano Mobility
in the 1910s–1920s

In the 1910s and 1920s, Mississippi planters followed the lead of agricultural
bosses elsewhere in the United States: they hired enganchadores, labor re-

Mexicans and Mexico in Jim Crow Mississippi 57
ruitment agencies that operated in Texas and along the Mexican border. These agents promised Mexican and Mexican American workers set wages and transported them to the agricultural fields of California, Arizona, the Midwest, and now the South. Whatever the destination, wages and conditions of work often bore little resemblance to those promised.  

Still, Mexicanos followed enganchadores, friends, and family members to faraway work sites in the 1910s and 1920s because, like African Americans in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, Mexicanos in South Texas held little hope of autonomy or advancement in their current location. While the northern side of the border may have appeared a safer alternative to the violence of the revolution and the economic havoc it wrought on Mexico’s countryside, the 1920s was precisely the period when systematized segregation, violence, and labor exploitation of Mexicanos hardened in South Texas. When a small group of Tejanos, Texas-born Mexican Americans, took inspiration from the Mexican Revolution in 1915 and plotted to throw out the Anglos who had conquered them seventy years before, white Texans responded with extreme vigilante violence that all but eliminated the last vestiges of political power Mexican-origin people held.  

Then, as both immigration from Mexico and the scale of Texas agriculture increased, Texas planters became increasingly committed to forcing Mexicanos into a permanent laboring underclass, policing their movements, suppressing their wages, and deliberately creating inadequate Mexican schools to ensure that agricultural work was their only option. Anglos also used mob violence to assert control, lynching dozens of Mexicans in the 1910s. In the 1920s, agents of the newly established U.S. Border Patrol harassed, assaulted, and sometimes killed those in the borderlands who appeared to be Mexican. As Mexico birthed a new regime and U.S. economic prosperity grew, Mexicanos in Texas felt themselves pounded by ever-thickening layers of economic and political repression, their lives getting worse, not better.  

Some Mexicans and Mexican Americans responded by forming organizations emphasizing loyalty to the United States, while others organized sociedades mutualistas, mutual aid societies, and Comisiones Honoríficas, consulate-affiliated Honorary Commissions, to draw on the strength of the Revolution-era Mexican government in demanding rights. Still others decided to leave, zigzagging their trucks northward by night to avoid detection by state officials or Border Patrol agents charged with ensuring that the Mexican labor force went nowhere. The secrecy surrounding their journeys was, in the words of one observer, akin to an “underground railroad.” Some
maintained homes in Texas and followed harvests seasonally to the Midwest or California, while others settled in these new places. Wherever they went, they maintained relationships with their Texas communities through letters, hometown clubs, and the Spanish-language press, even as the violence and poverty they had experienced in Texas haunted their memories and provided the major point of comparison to conditions in their new locations.27

While a few Mexicans settled in the Mississippi Delta as early as World War I, planters renewed their recruitment efforts in the early 1920s.28 Appeals for federal help with recruitment failed again; instead, private enganchadores brought Mexicano men and families from South Texas to work for wages in the cotton fields of Mississippi.29 As their trucks crossed the river from Arkansas into Mississippi, they wended their way on country roads, past the lakes and riverbeds of the Mississippi River’s natural and man-made diversions. Stately plantation houses, gins, and commissaries sat at the edges of vast cotton fields, far from the dilapidated bunkhouses and sharecroppers’ cabins Mexicans would occupy.30 Willow and cypress trees, browning as the fall wore on, provided meager shade from the September sun in what had once been tree-filled swampland. Mexicanos dispersed among the plantations in groups, from a handful to 200–300; when rains fell, roads became impassible by car, leaving them almost completely isolated.31 This isolation limited but did not foreclose Mexicans’ possibilities for community and resistance.

Most of Mississippi’s Mexicano laborers had experienced exploitative cotton work in South Texas and expected that the Delta would be an improvement in wages, conditions, or both. They quickly found otherwise.32 In early 1924, thirty Mexican families signed up with Laredo enganchadores to sharecrop on Richard Neelly’s plantation near Rolling Fork, Mississippi. Like their black counterparts, the Mexican sharecroppers were forced to purchase their food on credit at the plantation store, which they would then repay when they sold their cotton, also to the plantation, at the close of the season. In response to “simply intolerable” conditions, the newfound sharecroppers refused to work, and Neelly retaliated by cutting their food rations. On August 1, twenty-three of the plantation’s thirty Mexican families protested, staging “a small revolution in Camp . . . taking up their belongings and leaving.”33 Among them was Fidel Serja, who wrote of the experience in a letter to his sister in Laredo. The sister alerted Laredo’s Mexican consulate, who wrote to his counterpart in New Orleans, who in turn asked the U.S. Department of Justice to launch an investigation into possible peonage on Neelly’s farm.34 When investigators arrived at the farm, the seven Mexican families remaining
there reported they were not being held by force, and thus the case was closed. But Neelly’s hope that Mexicans would solve his labor woes were still dashed, as all seven families “stated that they would leave when they sold their crop.”

Another group of Mexicanos arrived to chop cotton in Issaquena County, Mississippi, in the spring of 1924 and quickly found themselves even worse off than their compatriots on the Neelly plantation: far from home, working sunup to sundown in mortal fear of their foremen. There, white planters immediately used the violent tactics they had employed on African Americans to extract as much labor as Mexican workers’ bodies could bear for as low a cost as possible. Wages bore no relationship to those promised by enganchadores, and workers who protested were liable to be punished. Many tried to leave the plantations, but search parties tracked them down, heading them off at train stations and on roads, beating them and forcibly returning them to work. One dissatisfied Mexican couple tried to flee along the Mississippi River but were quickly caught. A search party shot the man to death and returned his wife to the fields, leaving her husband’s dead body at the side of the road. Appealing to their families or the Mexican consulate for help was impossible, as foremen inspected Mexican workers’ letters before mailing. A few letters did make it back to Texas, and San Antonio’s largest Spanish-language newspaper, *La Prensa*, publicized their story.

“A Thousand Punishments” in 1925

Still, most of Texas’s Mexicanos did not hear these tales. The following year, a record number traversed the same routes to Mississippi, some with promises of $8 daily wages—several times higher than those offered in Texas. The San Antonio office of the U.S. Employment Service added Mississippi to its list of destinations for available Mexican workers, while Mexico’s Houston consulate supervised the signing of contracts between workers and their future employers. Labor-hungry planters in western Arkansas watched helplessly as trucks of Mexican workers passed their fields by en route from Texas to the Delta. “Never in the history of the states of Louisiana and Mississippi has there been such a large quantity of Mexicans as there are today,” marveled a Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper that September. “The planters are very satisfied with the work entrusted to our compatriots, and they are continuously praising them as wonderful farmhands.”

Mexicanos’ presence was indeed ubiquitous in the Delta’s fields in the fall of 1925. The Catholic priest in Clarksdale, Nelius Downing, claimed that 5,000 “Mexicans,” and presumably Mexican Americans, were picking cotton
on plantations throughout the region, in Clarksdale, Greenwood, Greenville, Cleveland, Tunica, and Hollandale. And, he wrote in October of 1925, “more are coming every day.” By the end of the 1925 picking season, Downing would pay a visit to every plantation in his Clarksdale parish, finding Mexicanos on all of them. He estimated that one-eighth would remain in the Delta, while the rest would move on or return to Texas. “Not a few planters,” he explained, “are very well pleased with them and will do all they can to have them remain.”

Planters indeed did all they could to keep Mexicanos in their fields, including the familiar resort to violence. Families in Weslaco, Texas, received letters from kin in Mississippi decrying the “thousand punishments” and injustices to which they had been subjected there. Rather than earning high wages, Mexicanos were not even paid enough to eat. Contracts signed with enganchadores were worthless and provided no protection. When four Mexicanos tried to leave the cotton fields near Clarksdale, they were apprehended as they tried to board a New Orleans-bound train and imprisoned in the town jail. One crew leader reported that Mexicanos in Greenville and Cleveland had been killed by their foremen; the crimes went unpunished. The abuse Mexicanos decried would have been intimately familiar to the African Americans picking cotton a few rows away in the same fields and plantations.

In turn, Mexicanos recognized the echo of African Americans’ oppression in their own treatment in Mississippi, and this increased their feelings of humiliation and exploitation. One woman wrote in horror to her Texas family that local officials in Mississippi attempted to force the burial of a Mexican man, Santiago Castillo, in the black cemetery. His compatriots refused to comply, and for three days the man’s body lay exposed as they sought permission to bury him somewhere, anywhere not set aside for the area’s most degraded residents. Castillo’s friends from Weslaco finally received permission to inter him in a riverbed, rather than the black cemetery. Though few African Americans lived in South Texas, Mexicanos had lived in the United States long enough to understand the consequences of being classed with blacks. So woeful was the experience of desperately saving her compatriot’s body from the black cemetery that the woman recounting it concluded her letter, “From what I have written, you will realize the crisis we are experiencing and the fact that we have lost all hope.”

The woman’s hopelessness reflected, in large part, isolation: Mississippi’s newly arrived Mexican workforce had few places to turn for help. Those who were U.S.-citizen Tejanos had no way to use their citizenship to claim...
rights. During this period, their southwestern counterparts formed mutual aid societies and the civil rights organization League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). The Delta’s African Americans joined civil rights organizations NAACP and United Negro Improvement Association, and both groups sometimes became members of the few labor unions that were not hostile to them. But Mississippi had no Mexican American middle class, and early attempts at cross-racial cotton labor organizing in the Delta had been violently crushed. While the historical record offers little insight into African American discussions of their Mexicano neighbors in Mississippi, national black publications of the time presented Mexicanos as both allies and competitors. Either way, Mississippi’s black organizations ignored them. The Delta’s Mexican nationals had the right to call on New Orleans’s consulate, but its staff did not conduct routine visits to Mississippi plantations and usually took greater interest in “protecting” their compatriots in New Orleans. Writing a letter in hopes of getting a reaction from the consulate or La Prensa in San Antonio—something only literate workers could do—provided Mexicanos’ only lifeline to external institutions with power.

The Catholic Church provided spiritual but not political support for the Delta’s Mexicanos. Catholic priests visited Mexicanos at their scattered plantation work sites throughout the 1920s, but the local bishop was ardently pro-segregation, and his priests saw themselves as peacekeepers and soul savers, not advocates. They were invited to the plantations by labor managers eager to retain their Mexican workforce. This, too, would have been familiar to African Americans, as during this period some Delta plantations encouraged the growth of black churches on their premises. Those churches’ pastors, in turn, supported the bosses against any “agitators or foreign elements.”

Catholic priests ministering to Mexicans similarly dismissed labor conflict as the result of outside meddling. Clarksdale’s Father Downing explained to his superiors that when Mexicans first arrived in the area in September 1925, they “were getting into trouble with outsiders and were not being paid enough also.” So Downing printed and distributed a pamphlet in English and poorly translated Spanish, advising workers to adhere strictly to their contracts, to never refuse to work, and to always avoid any contact with organizers. The pamphlet described these work contracts as expressions not only of U.S. law but also of “the laws of almighty God.” It continued, “Violations of the contract, such as agitating, refusing to work, or running away to other places, make you subject to a fine, imprisonment or both. Unfortunately, there are people already in prison for these offenses.” Sanctifying the local racial and economic order, Downing attempted to aid planters in maintaining
that order with their new workforce. The following month, the priest proudly claimed, “I have succeeded in getting practically all the Planters to give them [Mexican workers] a general increase of 25 cents a hundred [pounds of cotton]; better sleeping and living quarters; an assurance of trainfare home; plenty to eat if they fail to make enough, and many other considerations.” Furthermore, “Those who got in jail, I got out and restored to work.” In this decidedly local negotiation, the priest may also have been motivated by a desire to save Mexicans from retaliation for their acts of protest. Yet even if planters could threaten Mexicans with violence or have them thrown in jail, their utter desperation for labor meant that sometimes they also had to pay more to keep their workforce on site.

Still, with stories of abuse more widespread than those of twenty-five-cent raises, at the end of the 1925 picking season San Antonio’s La Prensa called on the Mexican consulate to open an investigation into Mexicans’ conditions of work in the Mississippi Delta. Days later, the consul reported that workers there indeed faced “humiliating” conditions, though it is not clear that he actually traveled to the Delta to see those conditions for himself. He filed a formal complaint with the governor of Arkansas and alerted the Mexican embassy in Washington, D.C., who in turn asked the U.S. secretary of state to request a Department of Justice investigation. The Arkansas complaint went nowhere and the results of the Justice investigation are unclear. Even as the consul pressed U.S. authorities, he told his countrymen: “Mexicans should not go to the plantations of Mississippi; the blacks left them because of the poor treatment they were receiving.” For hundreds of compatriots, the warning came too late: farmers who had agreed to pay their transportation back to Texas now refused, leaving these workers in Mississippi, abandoned in terrible housing with little food during the winter.

While planters wanted Mexicanos to stay in the area and many used force to ensure they would, other white observers in the Delta shared the consul’s sentiments that Mexicans would best avoid Mississippi. Prioritizing the area’s racial order over its labor needs, Sunflower County’s newspaper opined, “If the Mexican cotton pickers are ever needed here again, it will mean the beginning of another race problem. These fellows butt into exclusive white places and make themselves at home in negro places. They marry negro women and try to marry among the lower class of whites. We hope they will all leave this part of the Delta and never come back here.” Once again, it seemed, concerted efforts to recruit immigrant laborers had failed to secure a workforce fully compliant with the demands of Delta planters and the white supremacist society they inhabited.
**Settling into Mississippi**

Despite the concerns of both Mexican and white leaders, planters remained desperate for labor, and the racial humiliations of Texas kept Mexicanos there looking for an alternative. Even as word of abuses in Mississippi spread in the Rio Grande Valley’s Spanish-speaking communities, thousands of Mexicanos continued to seek work in the Delta’s cotton fields, albeit in somewhat smaller numbers after 1925. Now their intentions were different. Mexicanos may have been exploited by their enganchadores in the early 1920s, but they used the enganchadores, too—to acquire the familiarity with Mississippi that allowed them to return, this time as sharecroppers. Sharecropping allowed workers more control over their own labor and a sense of social ascendance. If conditions were abusive in both Texas and Mississippi, at least the latter offered them the opportunity to sharecrop rather than being permanently relegated to wage labor.65 Now living in the Delta at least nine months a year, Mississippi’s more settled Mexicano newcomers would eventually use the limited power within their reach to claw their way to the white side of the color line.

The demographic profile of the Delta’s Mexicano residents in the late 1920s mirrored that of the era’s Mexican and Tejano migrants in the United States overall. When census enumerators traveled down the Mississippi Delta’s country roads to survey families in April of 1930, the nearly 1,200 Mexicanos they encountered there were almost exclusively sharecropping families—after all, April was the planting season, not the more labor-intensive picking time when short-term hired hands were brought in.66 In Bolivar County, which had the most Mexicanos of any (see map 3), five-sixths of Mexicano household heads, wives, and boarders counted that year were Mexican born, while one-sixth were Tejanos.67 A quarter had first crossed the border before the Mexican Revolution, some as early as the 1880s; half crossed during the revolution (1910–17), and a quarter had crossed since its end.68 Overall, these workers’ backgrounds and migration histories made them typical of the era’s Mexican and Mexican American labor migrants overall.

Regardless of their original intentions, Mississippi’s Mexican sharecroppers between 1925 and the Depression were not migrant but had settled into Mississippi for at least a few years. Records of their children’s births and baptisms reveal this stability. Among Mexican sharecroppers in Bolivar County surveyed for the census in April 1930, most children born in 1925 or earlier had been born in Texas and a few in Mexico. Half of the five-year-olds, those born in 1925, were born in Texas and the other half in Mississippi. But the littlest children, those born after 1926, were majority Mississippi born.69 Further-
more, while the Delta’s Catholic priests baptized a few Mexican children in 1922–25, usually during the picking season in the fall, they baptized many more at all times of year from 1926 through 1932. In other words, most of the Mexican and Mexican American sharecropping families present in the Delta in 1930 were not mere sojourners on a one-off trip. They had laid roots in the Delta, most for more than five years and some for up to a decade.

For much of the year, their lives were similar to those of black sharecroppers. Their labors began in late winter, when they plowed under the last of the old season’s cotton plants and broke up the land with the help of tools, preparing rows for a new crop. In April, they walked along the rows to plant the new year’s seeds, which they had purchased on credit from the plantation. Late spring and early summer was the time to thin out the cotton plants and remove the weeds by chopping. It was also the time when their crop was at greatest risk. They could not control the rain: too little and some of the plants would not make it, too much and the stalk would shoot up to the sky, stealing energy from the growth sharecroppers really needed, the bolls of cotton lint lying within the plant’s blooms. When those bolls burst open in the fall, entire families and children as young as five took to the rows to pick out the lint and deposit it in large sacks that trailed behind them. When the sacks were full, they dumped the cotton into a wagon or truck and brought it to the plantation’s gin, which separated the lint from the seeds. Prohibited from taking their cotton lint to the open market, sharecroppers then sold it to the plantation. If all went well, the sharecropper’s half of the proceeds would pay off the debts he had incurred at the start of the season, leaving his family a bit of money to make it through the winter until the next year’s crop. And if it did not, all they would have to show for the season was debt.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans had strong roots elsewhere and might use the start of winter to return to Texas or Mexico if they had the funds to get there. Some bought a few livestock such as chickens, hogs, and cows and survived the winter in Mississippi on meager meat and eggs. Others, like A. González, left their wives and children in Mississippi and migrated elsewhere for temporary work at the end of the cotton harvest. Living even more precariously than he had in Mississippi, González’s tertiary migration ended in tragedy. He was accidentally run over while asleep on the railroad tracks in Middlesboro, Kentucky, in November 1930.

In the late 1920s, Mexicanos’ hopes that the Delta would afford them more economic progress than South Texas were not entirely misplaced. As settled sharecroppers, they had at least eliminated the enganchador middleman and could negotiate the terms of work directly with planters. Like African Ameri-
Mexicans knew that while bosses might use violence to keep them from leaving, the area’s labor market favored workers. After the last of the crop had been sold each winter, “January was ‘movin’ month” for sharecroppers in the Delta,” explained one historian. Mexican sharecroppers were no exception, as they sought the best conditions and compensation wherever in the area they might be. Sara and José Esparza, for example, lived on plantations in Skene, Pace, and then Cleveland—each location less than ten miles from the other—between 1923 and 1934. Carmen and Herminio Lucio moved a dozen miles from Skene to Shaw in 1929, then relocated again, to a plantation forty miles upriver in Gunnison, in the early 1930s. Their children’s godparents, Antonio and Aurelia Conteras, moved with their children the few miles from Gunnison to Waxhaw and then back again over a ten-year period. With both Mexicanos and African Americans willing to move around in search of the best wages and conditions, most planters eventually had to accept that violence alone would not get their labor needs met.

The Mississippi River flood of 1927 further destabilized the area’s labor force, to planters’ chagrin and, eventually, Mexicans’ benefit. An estimated 5,000 Mexicans numbered among the half-million people displaced in the fourteen million acres of flooded land during the planting season that April. The Red Cross brought relief programs to the area, but local planters controlled their disbursement to ensure that every poor person who remained in the Delta, particularly African Americans, would still have to pick cotton in order to eat. The Red Cross did establish a special camp for Mexican refugees from the flood, and about 250 Mexicans took shelter there. One Mexican woman “lost her husband and two children in the flood and she is in the hospital very sick,” wrote a priest who visited the distraught woman in the hospital. As the flood made national news in both English and Spanish, working- and middle-class Mexican immigrants throughout the country, in South Texas, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Oklahoma, donated money to aid the flood’s Mexican victims. The Mexican consul in New Orleans appropriated funds for the cause as well. “Entire settlements of Mexicans have disappeared before the impetuous advance of the waters,” decried Los Angeles’s El Heraldo de México. “For several years, our compatriots have lived there, fighting tenaciously and ardently in the cotton fields, saving up their little inheritances and hoping to gather a bit of capital with which to return to the land of their ancestors.” Aid from compatriots may have placed Mexican immigrant flood survivors in a marginally better position than their African American counterparts. Either way, the flood caused many African
Americans to redouble their efforts to leave, increasing Mexicanos’ bargaining power in the coming cotton season.

The case of the Mexicano workers on the area’s largest plantation, British-owned Delta & Pine Land (D&PL), shows that particularly after the flood, even Mississippi’s most powerful planters were not immune to the laws of supply and demand. In 1924, a plantation manager there had tried to secure federal help in transporting Mexicano workers from Texas to its vast cotton fields in Mississippi. Though bureaucrats did not respond, D&PL managers still drew Mexican sharecroppers to their fields in 1926 or 1927, and in the fall following the flood they asked Catholic officials to help them recruit more from Texas. In exchange, plantation president Oscar Johnston offered to build a permanent school and church for Mexicans on the plantation and pay a Spanish-speaking priest’s salary. Like the federal government, church officials declined to act as labor recruiters, and so Johnston’s managers tried to lure Mexican workers by offering them better treatment than the competition. At the close of the picking season in 1927, fifteen Mexicans working at D&PL bought cars with the money they had earned “and were not cheated out of,” observed the local priest. Through their willingness to move and awareness of their own bargaining power, these workers successfully leveraged planters’ hunger for labor to achieve the economic progress they had been unable to secure in Mexico or Texas.

Recognizing the economic opportunity that the flood had presented to those who survived it, a small group of immigrants founded Mississippi’s first Mexican community organization weeks after the waters receded. These local leaders, including Manuel Solis and Telesforo Robledo, emulated organizing they had witnessed in Texas when they founded the Mexican Honorary Commission at Alligator, Mississippi. Honorary Commissions, known in Spanish as Comisiones Honoríficas, were meant to function as volunteer extensions of Mexican consulates who would promote Mexican culture and nationalism among the immigrants in their communities. They were often bearers of a Mexican middle-class progressive tradition, middlemen who had some voice before both the consulate and white power holders on behalf of working-class Mexicans. Alligator’s Commission, led by poor sharecroppers with middle-class aspirations, soon moved twenty miles south to Gunnison, perhaps because its members relocated there to send their children to the Mary Ann School established just for Mexican children on the plantation of J. G. McGehee.

Embracing their charge to promote Mexican nationalism in the Delta, the
sharecroppers at the Commission’s helm invited all the Mexicans they knew
to their celebration of the Cinco de Mayo holiday in 1928. Immigrant share-
croppers found their way to the plantation school that Saturday, perhaps with
the help of the few compatriots who had cars. For several hours that evening,
they were not poor racialized laborers but rather patriots in the service of a
larger cause. The program began with a chorus of children singing the Mexi-
can national anthem, while sharecroppers accompanied them in a makeshift
orchestra. A teen then read aloud an account of the battle of Puebla, when
Mexican troops drove out French would-be conquerors on May 5, 1862. Com-
misson president Manuel Solís addressed the attendees, and then a dozen
children individually read poems or other recitations. Carving out a space
for community life in a society that saw them only as workers, the families
then danced together to Mexican music into the wee hours of the night.90

Confronting the Color Line

By 1928, then, a small group of Mexicans and Mexican Americans had tried
to forge a future in the Mississippi Delta, believing they had greater oppor-
tunities there than in South Texas or on the migrant trail in the Midwest.
Yet Mexicanos plainly saw that African Americans had little possibility for
social mobility besides leaving the Delta entirely.91 As the 1925 struggle over
Santiago Castillo’s corpse attested, Mexicanos remained vigilant to signs that
they would be classed alongside African Americans in the area’s racial hier-
archy. Before long, Gunnison’s Mexican Honorary Commission would turn
its attention from encouraging Mexican patriotism to fighting for Mexicanos’
improved racial status.

Mexicanos waged this struggle to achieve their own goals for social mobil-
ity, and there is little evidence that it reflected their private attitudes toward
African Americans.92 While Mexicanos and African Americans generally
worked in distinct crews and family groups, they encountered each other
by circumstance and by choice. Residential segregation by race was a fea-
ture of cities and towns rather than plantation back roads, and Mexicanos
lived among both black and white sharecroppers, though most often among
blacks. Nine out of ten Mexicanos in Bolivar County had at least some black
neighbors in April 1930, while four out of ten had at least some white neigh-
bors.93 Though the historical record leaves few clues as to poor black and
white sharecroppers’ views of their Mexicano neighbors during this period,
members of both groups, though African Americans more often, did form
intimate relationships with the newcomers. African Americans Lula and Kit
Mason took their daughter’s new Mexican-born husband, Manuel Sifuentez, into their home, and Mexican-born Antonio Martínez settled down with his African American wife, Sarah.94 Other black families housed Mexican men for a fee, in one case assigning the nickname “Mexican Sam” to a Mexican-born boarder. The consequences of living with blacks were suggested by the notation of a census enumerator, who in 1930 listed Mexican Sam’s race as Negro, rather than Mexican.95 Though less common, some Mexican men married white women as well. Maggie Mackenzie was a Mississippi-born white woman alone in her thirties with six children to support. She married Frank Torres, a Texas-born Mexican American man nine years her junior.96 While marrying a black man in the 1920s would have brought banishment or even death to an impoverished white woman in the Delta, marrying a Mexican American man apparently was more acceptable.97 Having grown up in Texas, Frank Torres knew well the benefits of marrying “up” in the racial hierarchy, which may have motivated him to do so despite Maggie’s more advanced age and the financial burden of supporting her six children.

While planters and white officials initially used violence on Mexican workers as severely as they had on African Americans, many locals entertained the possibility that their racial classification could be distinct from that of blacks. The region’s white leaders had experience creating new racial categories beyond just black and white, most notably in their responses to the Italian and Chinese immigrants who first came to the region in the late nineteenth century. Just across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg, in Tallulah, Louisiana, Sicilians were lynched in the late 1890s; Chinese, too, were initially considered nonwhite.98 As the largest influx of Mexicanos arrived at Mississippi’s fields in 1925, the Mississippi Supreme Court ruled in the case Gong Lum v. Rice that a Mississippi-born Chinese girl, Martha Lum, could not attend the white school in Rosedale, Bolivar County. The court reasoned that while the Mississippi state constitution may have referred specifically to “whites” and “Negroes” in its sanction of segregation, its intent was to preserve the purity of the Caucasian race from all other races, not only blacks. While “Negroes” were the only threat to this purity at the time of the constitution’s writing, surely it intended for all non-Caucasian races to be schooled separately. In defining these “colored” races, the court followed the lead of a Washington state court that utilized the categorization of racial groups first generated by German physiologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in 1776:99 “(1) The Caucasian, or white race, to which belong the greater part of the European nations and those of Western Asia; (2) the Mongolian, or yellow race, occupying Tartary, China, Japan, etc.; (3) the Ethiopian, or negro (black) race, occupying all
Africa, except the North; (4) the American, or red race, containing the Indian of North and South America; and (5) the Malay, or brown race, occupying the islands of the Indian Archipelago. Since Chinese fell into the “Mongolian” category, they could be excluded from the white school. A third school for Chinese students opened as a result and operated intermittently in Bolivar County during the 1930s. The ruling and its consequences set a precedent for racial compromise: white leaders could exclude new racial groups from their own schools and spaces but would also stop short of relegating them to those of blacks.

Though Mexicanos also lived in Bolivar County at the time, the Gong Lum decision, later affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court, did not explicitly mention them nor did it indicate into which of these five categories they might fall. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which brought an end to the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–48, implicitly guaranteed Mexicanos’ status as Caucasian by promising them “the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens of the United States.” But subsequent legal opinions citing the treaty left room for interpretation, and white officials in Mississippi may not have known about them in any case. They thus interpreted Gong Lum as a license to exclude all undesirable immigrants from white schools. In 1926, a year after both the Gong Lum decision and the large-scale arrival of Mexican workers, the Bolivar County Schools Board of Trustees voted to prohibit Mexicans from attending the Gunnison Consolidated School with white children. Instead, the county paid Mexican Honorary Commission president Manuel Solís to offer instruction at the Mary Ann School, a separate Mexican school on the Gunnison plantation of J. G. McGehee. In so doing, local authorities sent a clear message to Mexicanos that they were not welcome in white society. Mexican community leaders seem to have found the school a tolerable compromise, sending their children there and using its building as a home base for their patriotic celebrations.

Yet just a few months after being reelected president of Gunnison’s Honorary Commission, teacher Manuel Solís left town, creating a crisis for his compatriots. Authorities were unable to convince a young Tejana woman to assume the role of teacher, and the number of Mexican children in the area had dwindled. Honorary Commission treasurer Telesforo Robledo and his wife, María, along with a couple newly arrived from Mississippi’s Lake Cormorant, Rafael and Martha Landrove, managed to enroll their children in the local white school in 1928. It is not clear whether the decision to admit them came from a high-level administrator or a secretary unaware of the controversy their admission might cause. Pupils eleven-year-old Hortensia
Landrove and her fourteen-year-old uncle George thus attended the white school for a few weeks during the winter of 1928–29. The following year, the Robledo children enrolled in the white second-grade class once the cotton was picked. While the Robledos pulled their son Freddo out in February to help prepare for the next cotton crop, their daughter Jubertina finished out the school year, struggling with English but otherwise earning As and Bs. She was promoted to the third grade at the end of the year even as many of her peers were left behind.\textsuperscript{106} She became the first Mexican child to complete the academic year in the white elementary school of Gunnison, Mississippi. In early 1930, school officials began to enforce the 1926 school board ruling and told the Mexican families their children could not attend the white school.\textsuperscript{107} The Landroves and Robledos thus confronted the possibility of sending their children to the black school or to no school at all. In addition to the racial stigma that attached to them, the Delta’s black schools made little real attempt to educate students, with some enrolling 100 pupils for every teacher and offering barely four months of annual instruction to ensure that black children were on hand for the planting and picking of cotton.\textsuperscript{108} Of course, the Landroves and Robledos could have left the Delta altogether as thousands of other Mexicano families had done over the course of a decade, but they chose instead to find a way to challenge the ruling. In so doing, they participated in a national movement, probably unknowingly. That same year, Mexican families in Lemon Grove, California, and Del Rio, Texas, mounted challenges to Mexicanos’ exclusion from white schools.\textsuperscript{109} Yet unlike Mexicanos in the Southwest, the Delta’s Mexicans had neither Mexican American organizations nor white liberal lawyers on whom to rely. The Delta’s Mexican leaders were trying to shift their position in the area’s Jim Crow system, and to do so they would have to pick their allies carefully. The most powerful people with whom they had frequent contact were the area’s Catholic priests, yet the immigrants wisely decided not to appeal to the church for assistance. Whatever their views on long-standing church–state conflicts in north-central Mexico, both the Landroves and Robledos had baptized their children and godparented others at Our Lady of Victory in Cleveland.\textsuperscript{110} Still, they correctly perceived that in Mississippi, church officials viewed “Mexican” as a separate and distinct race. Priests spoke about “Mexicans” as a homogenous group without regard to citizenship, recorded them separately from whites on church censuses even before the U.S. census offered a separate category, and arranged specific services and religious education for Mexicans.\textsuperscript{111} There is little evidence that they sought to minister to Mexicans alongside the Delta’s other main Catholic group, Italians. While
Mexicans in New Orleans had used white Catholic churches as a vehicle for their assimilation into white New Orleans, Mississippi’s Mexicanos saw no such potential in the Delta.

Though they did not adopt all southwestern stereotypes of Mexicans, priests did espouse one repeatedly: the image of Mexicans as poor, docile, and “childlike.” Clarksdale’s Catholic priest described them as “poor . . . struggling to keep body and soul together and illiterate at that.” Later, he mused, “when our Blessed Lord said ‘Unless you become as little children you cannot enter the Kingdom of God’ He could have had in mind those poor faithful children, the Mexicans.” Whatever their paternalistic intentions to help Mexicans, priests remained entrenched in the U.S. American system of fixed racial categories, seeing Mexicanos as inherently unfit for self-determination and political personhood.

The Mexican Strategy

Local priests were unable to imagine Mexicans playing a different role in the Delta’s racial hierarchy; the area had no Mexican American middle class, white liberals, or active tenant organizing; and African Americans were preoccupied with survival and their own abundant political struggles. Conversely, the Landroves and Robledos had established contact with the Mexican consulate thanks to their involvement with the local Honorary Commission. Their most proximate advocate was actually hundreds of miles away in New Orleans. Mexicans in the Southwest also petitioned Mexican consulates for assistance in their school desegregation struggles, but there these consulates in turn engaged local liberal advocates. The Mississippi case played out differently. Because there were no political partners in the South who could make claims on U.S. citizenship, Mexicans’ racial politics in the South were just that—Mexican.

The life history of the man who ultimately succeeded in reversing the Mississippi schools’ decision provides one window onto the interaction between two seemingly opposed racial ideologies: the Mexican system, favoring race mixing and positivist cultural “improvement,” and the South’s Jim Crow, a binary system ostensibly based on biological definitions of race. Rafael Landrove was born in northern Mexico, probably Nuevo León or Coahuila, in 1893. Since at least the 1870s, the Landrove family had migrated within Mexico to better their circumstances. His parents and siblings moved between Zaragoza, Coahuila, and several towns in Nuevo León, among them Lampazos de Naranjo, where his father, Rafael, and mother, Petra Jayme, married in 1879.
In an area dominated by ranching and agriculture, the Landrove siblings were small-town urbanites, members of the aspiring middle classes that emerged under the regime of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico’s dictator almost without interruption from 1876 to 1911. In his early decades of rule, Díaz had succeeded in growing Mexico’s economy and developing its infrastructure, particularly in the north. For the first time, for example, railroads connected the Lampazos area to both Mexico City and the U.S.-Mexico border, giving its residents and agricultural capitalists access to new markets, goods, and work sites throughout both countries. The climate of economic prosperity in the north led to greater social mobility there than elsewhere, making it “the land of the self-made man” as a small middle class began to develop in its towns and cities.\footnote{116}

As the Landroves moved from town to town, they employed entrepreneurial strategies in their attempts to become “self-made”—attempts that never quite succeeded, at least in Mexico. Rafael’s brother Constancio made his living between Lampazos and San Antonio, Texas, where he moved and married in 1913 and worked as a blacksmith. By 1930, he owned a home.\footnote{117} Despite settling in Texas, Constancio renewed his ties to Lampazos, registering his Texas-born children with the municipality there and even opening a liquor store in the town in 1916.\footnote{118} Brothers Melchor and José worked as musicians.\footnote{119} Sisters Margarita and María owned a restaurant in Lampazos but did not find the economic stability of marriage. Both gave birth to “illegitimate” children and supported them on their own; in María’s case, that meant moving a few hundred miles north to the border town of Laredo, Texas, where she worked as a cook and servant for a middle-class Tejano family.\footnote{120} Margarita, too, eventually moved to the United States, settling in Oklahoma.\footnote{121}

The Landrove siblings were not alone in their frustration at a stifled social ascent. Indeed, Rafael Landrove was about seventeen years old in 1910 when his generation of middling northern Mexicans rebelled against the late Porfiriato’s social inequalities, though not necessarily against its promises of individual and national improvement, progress, and modernization. The north’s rising middle class saw itself reflected in this positivist vision during the early years of the Porfiriato. Yet particularly after the economic downturn of 1905, the lower and middle classes were increasingly squeezed, and the contrast between expectation and reality led the region to become a hotbed of opposition to the Díaz regime.\footnote{122} Though Díaz and his conservative followers were politically defeated by 1914, the new elite inherited many of the old guard’s ideological legacies.\footnote{123}

Revolution, however, still did not allow Landrove to realize his ambi-
tion of class ascendance, so he journeyed to the U.S.-Mexico border in his midtwenties, around 1916. He lived for a few years between Piedras Negras, Mexico, and Eagle Pass, Texas, across the border, and fathered a daughter, Hortensia, in 1919.124 Though his brother Constancio had found a measure of economic stability in San Antonio, Rafael’s failure to do so parallels the declining fortunes of most Mexicans in South Texas during the 1920s. Like his sister Margarita and countless other Mexican immigrants, Rafael Landrove’s journey north began in South Texas but did not end in that place of racial oppression. By 1924, Landrove was traveling to work in the rapidly expanding cotton industry of East-Central Texas, and there he wed Martha Perry (or possibly Pérez), a Tejana from the East Texas town of Nacogdoches.125 Within three years, the couple had moved yet again, to Lake Cormorant at the far northern end of the Mississippi Delta.126

Once Landrove was there, his strategy for racial and economic “progress” did not draw on the biological understanding of race then dominant in the United States, in which “one drop” of African blood made a person black and some argued that “one drop” of Indian blood could make Mexicans Indian.127 Rather, Landrove’s understandings of race and class emerged from his social position in Mexico. He told the census enumerator in 1930 that although he was born in Mexico, his parents were Cuban and his Texas-born wife, Martha, had Spanish parentage.128 Yet records in Lampazos, some of which describe Rafael’s mother, Petra Jayme, as a native of the town, reveal that his claim on the census was a lie.129 A photograph of the couple (fig. 7) shows Rafael’s skin to be very dark, too dark to claim biological European parentage. Landrove presumably sought through Cubanness to extricate himself from the denigrated “Mexican” racial category he and his wife had known so well during their time in Texas.

This early 1928 family photograph of Rafael and Martha Landrove reveals their middle-class aspirations, framed in both Mexican and U.S. terms. The photo survived, loose and unframed, in the personal collection of his friends, the Enriquez family.130 Thus, there is no way to know how the Landroves themselves used this photo. Was it in an album or, more likely, framed on a wall?131 Either way, its visual conventions fell squarely within scholars’ consensus about family photographs: they were typically idealized versions of domestic life.132 By the end of the nineteenth century, the posed family photograph had emerged in the United States as a representation of the middle-class ideal: an economically independent husband, nonworking domestic wife, and a baby inheriting the legacy of race and class privilege bestowed by her parents.133 The Porfrian positivist tradition encouraged the creation
of such images for a complementary reason: as symbols of Mexico’s modernity. Mexican migrants themselves valued such self-portraits in middle-class dress as reminders that they were more than the racialized laborers white U.S. observers believed them to be.

All of these traditions are visible in the Landroves’ posed family photo. The pen in Rafael Landrove’s pocket implied that he was a professional, which, in Mississippi, he was not; Martha’s fur coat and pearl necklace suggested a wealth the couple did not possess. The bench on which they sat certainly did not belong in their sharecroppers’ cabins in the northern Mississippi Delta. By the time this photograph was taken, the Landroves may have conformed nominally to the type represented: Rafael Landrove was indeed literate, the couple’s more formal clothing suggests at least a modicum of economic progress, and like half of Mexican families in the Delta, they claimed Martha did not work. Yet the image nonetheless exaggerates these
qualities, depicting an aspiration more than a reality. It helps explain why the Mexican government, not the Catholic Church, was Landrove’s advocate of choice. The photograph depicts a modern middle-class family, not a family of “poor” and “simple” Mexicans.

Yet two years after commissioning this middle-class image of his family, Landrove had nowhere to send his children to school. The black school was unacceptable to him, the Mexican school had closed, and the white school now rejected his children. Unlike his counterparts in Texas, Landrove could appeal to no U.S. citizen middle class to pursue his children’s readmission to the white school through a “Caucasian” legal strategy. Rather, like his counterparts in Lemon Grove, California, he sought help from the nearest Mexican consulate. In so doing, he drew on the social and political status that New Orleans’s Mexican bureaucrats like Armando Amador and upper-class families like that of Hortensia Horcasitas, discussed in Chapter 1, had amassed through their cultural representations of Mexicanness to white New Orleans.

The Mexican government’s paternalistic concept of protección, protection of emigrants, obligated it to respond somehow to the appeal of a poor, dark-skinned Mexican like Landrove. Though records suggest that the consulate looked less favorably on appeals from Mississippi than on those from its backyard of New Orleans, its officials sometimes intervened directly on behalf of poor Mexicans in the Delta in the case of wage disputes and criminal matters. In fall 1930, for example, the consulate successfully helped Tomás Vielma recover the $30 that Greenville farmer T. P. Ranes underpaid him for his labor planting and picking cotton. When it came to intervening in the race politics of Jim Crow, however, the “protection” mission came into direct conflict with another aspect of the nascent Mexican nationalist agenda: the promotion of the “cosmic race,” or raza cósmica, ideology that celebrated race mixing in direct opposition to the white supremacy of Mexico’s northern neighbor. But in Mississippi, “protection” meant cooperation with white supremacy by securing Mexicans’ recognition as white, or at least not black.

Though contemporaneous with the “Mexican school” court cases in Lemon Grove, California, and Del Rio, Texas, Landrove’s Mexican strategy to achieve educational desegregation departed from the strategy deployed in the Southwest, which emphasized the promises of U.S. citizenship and relied on Mexicans’ legal classification as Caucasian. LULAC, an organization that restricted its membership to U.S. citizens, argued the case in Texas. The Lemon Grove, California, case started like Mississippi’s, with distressed parents appealing to the Mexican consulate there. But in California, that Mexican
consul contracted a liberal white lawyer who presented Mexican parents’ petition stating that their children were almost all U.S. born and therefore entitled to all the rights and privileges of U.S. citizens.142 This argument, too, relied on the presumption that Mexicans were legally Caucasian. The Mexican and Mexican American plaintiffs in Lemon Grove succeeded while those in Del Rio lost their case.143 Either way, the so-called Caucasian strategy, which also emphasized U.S. citizenship, failed to end the segregation of Mexican children, who now were kept apart based on alleged linguistic or cultural deficiencies.144 Furthermore, many historians have criticized this “Caucasian” strategy, contending that its “pact” with white supremacy hindered the civil rights struggles of both Mexicanos and African Americans.145

In Mississippi, however, the consul did not appeal to U.S. legal precedents about Mexicans’ citizenship status or racial categorization. Rather, he wrote to Mississippi’s governor, Theodore Bilbo, asking for Mexicans’ admission to the white school based on a presumed mutual “desire to strengthen the cordial relations that fortunately now exist between both countries,” the United States and Mexico.146 The argument depended not on the racial qualifications of Mexicans nor on U.S. legal precedent but rather on the influence of a foreign government. Indeed, though the Mexican government sought to retain the loyalty of its citizens abroad by intervening on their behalf, in these years it had scant leverage in its dealings with the U.S. federal government.147 Bureaucrats thus relied on the persuasion of stateness—the respect Mexico could command from local authorities, if not necessarily federal ones, by virtue of being its own sovereign nation-state.

The strategy worked. Governor Bilbo responded to the consul’s request, and by April, Landrove won the dispute. The following school year Hortensia Landrove, her young uncle George Pérez, and Telesforo Robledo’s son Trinidad once again enrolled in the white school after they had finished helping their families pick that season’s cotton. All three finished out the academic year and were passed on to the next grade.148 Rafael Landrove had gained his children’s admission to the white school solely under the banner of Mexican nationalism. Though Landrove’s original petition to the consulate did not enter the archival record, nowhere in the consulate’s letters to Landrove or Bilbo did Mexican officials use the word “Caucasian,” nor did they appeal to liberal ideas of U.S. citizenship. Rather, Landrove and the Mexican consulate were allied under the banner of an inclusive, modernizing Mexican nationalism. In turn, the consulate utilized the political capital generated through its advantageous position in New Orleans, making good, at least this time, on the Mexican government’s postrevolutionary promise of national homogeneity.
and equality. The racial position of Mexicanos in the Mississippi Delta thus hinged not only on the logic of U.S. white supremacy but also on the Mexican government’s power to influence local officials’ application of that logic.

The victory in the Gunnison schools was crucial for Rafael Landrove. His children’s education alongside white children, something that would not have occurred in Texas, seemed to introduce the possibility of his family’s eventual ascendance into the Delta’s white middle class. Yet the Landroves’ transformation from poor Mexicans to poor whites began at a moment when the latter identity’s utility was rapidly declining. Indeed, Mexicanos had entered sharecropping in the Delta at the beginning of its end. As the Depression caused cotton prices to crash from seventeen cents per pound in 1929 to six cents per pound in 1931, sharecroppers, white, black, and Mexicano, found themselves unable to pay the debts they had incurred by purchasing seed and equipment, let alone turn any profit.\(^{149}\) For most of the Delta’s Mexicanos, the experiment with Mississippi was over.

The Depression brought federal relief into a region that had long resisted it, and that relief held the potential to shape the social order. In many parts of the United States, social workers dispensing charity in the 1930s became de facto immigration agents, encouraging the deportation and repatriation of unemployed immigrants and their families.\(^{150}\) Mississippi relief agencies had a different charge: even in the Depression, powerful planters worried that they would not have enough labor come cotton-picking time.\(^{151}\) Absent white-driven deportation and repatriation efforts, destitute Mexican sharecroppers begged the consulate in New Orleans for financial assistance returning to Mexico. Though the consulate typically arranged for free or discounted shipboard repatriation for its compatriots in New Orleans, it denied each claim that came from the cotton fields. These decisions reflected Mexican bureaucrats’ priorities in the Depression: they used their limited resources to preserve Mexicanos’ good image in the commercially important city of New Orleans. Poor Delta sharecroppers like Timotea Arroyo were on their own. Arroyo wrote from Estill, near Greenville, in November 1930. Her husband was sick with no medical care, and she was unable to support her children. Drawing on their experiences with repatriation efforts elsewhere, consulate officials suggested that Arroyo find a charitable organization to transport her family to the border, at which time the Mexican government would fund the rest of their journey. Arroyo replied that Estill had no such group, and so like hundreds of her compatriots in 1930, she remained destitute and abandoned in the Delta.\(^{152}\)

The Depression had wiped out the meager financial gains, hopes for social
mobility, and communal institutions of the Delta’s more settled Mexicanos. Many Mexicano families who came to Mississippi in the 1920s and 1930s ended up returning to the Southwest, but others continued the search for an alternative. When the Mexicano children baptized in Mississippi in the 1920s and 1930s eventually married in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, many wed other Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the rural Midwest. Their nuptials took place in towns like Waukegan, Illinois; Albion, Michigan; Kenosha, Wisconsin; and Fostoria, Ohio—though it is difficult to know if they had settled in these places or were passing through as migrant workers.¹⁵³

Rafael Landrove, however, was not to give up so easily on Mississippi. In August 1931, he wrote to the consulate to reestablish Gunnison’s Honorary Commission. While the group hoped to celebrate Mexican Independence Day, its real goal was to organize the Mexicanos in the area to “regulate the cotton market and prevent a disaster in the next harvest.”¹⁵⁴ Landrove again turned to the Mexican government for help gaining economic stability in Mississippi. By 1932, however, he had apparently lost hope and petitioned the consulate for repatriation assistance, which was denied.¹⁵⁵ But he remained in Mississippi at least eight years beyond this appeal, continuing to add children to his and Martha’s family and applying for naturalization in Mississippi courts in 1940.¹⁵⁶ On his petition for naturalization, he listed his color as “white,” his complexion as “natural,” and his race, once again, as “Cuban.” Records do not indicate how the Landroves left Mississippi, only that they eventually divorced and made their homes in more traditional areas of Mexican American settlement. Rafael Landrove moved to Sacramento in 1949 and died there in 1976, while Martha died three years later in Houston.¹⁵⁷

Though the Landroves left the Mississippi Delta, their middle-class self-conception and Mexican strategy—expectations forged in the positivist tradition of Mexico’s nineteenth century and politics born in the revolution of the twentieth—succeeded in winning new rights for their family and their compatriots. The revolution had not fulfilled its promises for Rafael Landrove in Mexico, but in Mississippi it did create more social mobility for his and other Mexican immigrant families. His successful strategy was one inaccessible to his Tejano counterparts in Mississippi, who were citizens of the United States but did not have any means to realize the rights that citizenship technically conferred. After all, even the Southwest’s Mexican American middle class spent three decades pursuing civil rights through claims to U.S. citizenship and “Caucasian” identities, yet most Mexican and Mexican American children there continued to attend segregated schools.

For their part, Mexican government representatives well understood the
realities of their “protective” role in the U.S. South, not only in cosmopolitan New Orleans but also in the more challenging environment of the Mississippi Delta. Their choices show that while Mexican nationalist bureaucrats’ celebration of race mixing may have been unpalatable to U.S. sensibilities, their parallel emphasis on cultural, political, and economic whitening—the Porfiriato’s legacy—could serve as a wedge into the winning side of U.S.-style white supremacy. That both Mexican government representatives and individual Mexican immigrants so readily dispensed with mestizaje reveals the thin penetration of “cosmic race” nationalism a decade after the revolution’s close, as well as the influence of U.S. white supremacy on the development of Mexican racial ideologies. Furthermore, it shows that the Jim Crow system incorporated cultural and political understandings of race into its ostensibly eugenic system decades before segregation’s demise forced a change to more veiled forms of cultural racism. This happened because southern Jim Crow did not stand alone—not in the nation and not in the world. By recruiting Mexican workers to their plantations, the Delta’s white farmers unwittingly recruited international influences into a notoriously closed racial system.

Delta Legacies

The more settled community of Mexicano sharecroppers from the late 1920s mostly left the area in the early 1930s, but the Depression changed the region’s agricultural systems in ways that would eventually encourage more Mexicanos to arrive. From 1933 to 1939, the federal government’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) paid planters to let their lands lie fallow in order to reduce the commodity’s oversupply and arrest its downward price spiral. Planters were supposed to split these payments with their sharecroppers, but most evicted them instead. Armed with more capital and facing an ample supply of labor, planters now insisted on working with wage laborers rather than sharecroppers. The shift would prove permanent. Some of the Delta’s long-standing Mexicano families managed to return to sharecropping, but a larger number of Mexicanos began to arrive as wage laborers from the mid-1930s onward.

Though Mississippi farmers were comparatively slow to take advantage of the guest worker program that would come to be known as the bracero program, the influx of Mexican laborers into Texas after 1942 made it easier for them to recruit Tejanos for the picking season. Tejanos and a small number of braceros picked cotton in Mississippi alongside African Americans and German prisoners during the war years. During the 1950s, hundreds of Tejano
families settled in Mississippi, where they performed agricultural labor until mechanical cotton pickers slowly replaced them in the fields.¹⁶⁰

For decades, these Mexican and Mexican American newcomers faced an uneven process of racialization. Local authorities continued to bury Mexicanos in Clarksdale’s black cemetery in the early 1930s. When the area’s Mexicans asked the New Orleans consulate to intervene, they received no advocacy, only instructions to take up a collection themselves to ensure their compatriots’ burial “in a different place from that which is intended for the colored race.”¹⁶¹ Two years later, Baptist ministers held a service for Mexicanos in a black church, presuming perhaps with cause that at least some would be willing to attend in that location.¹⁶² When Mexicanos returned to the area in larger numbers during the 1940s, their admission to white schools remained contested. A priest reported in 1946, “Some of the white schools here in the Delta will admit the children of these Mexican families, and other white schools will not admit them. For instance, Friars Point School will admit them but the Clarksdale City Schools will not admit them.” White privilege, however, still had its limits for poor Delta cotton pickers. “Practically all the children of the King & Anderson plantation could attend the Friars Point School if the Plantation Manager would cooperate,” observed the priest. “The children have to work in the fields just like the adults and very few of them go to school.”¹⁶³

Over time, however, recognition as white did bring material rewards and the possibility of social mobility to the Delta’s Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The few families that continued to sharecrop—the Enriquezes, Vargases, Palacioses, and others—maintained a distinctly Mexican communal life in private, staying friends with each other and with newer Mexican arrivals, socializing at country dances with Mexican bands, and often speaking Spanish at home.¹⁶⁴ But from the 1930s through the demise of segregation, most of the Delta’s Mexican Americans sent their children to white schools, and from the 1940s they married white people in substantial numbers.¹⁶⁵ Stories from the 1960s and beyond suggest that Mississippi’s Mexican Americans deliberately avoided public discussions of their ethnic heritage, the cost for their admission to the Delta’s white middle class.¹⁶⁶ That group has had its own hardships, suffering periods of unemployment and economic downturn, and Mexican Americans have been along for the ride. Many of them, the descendants of Rafael Landrove’s friends and compatriots, remain in the Delta to this day.