

by Lara Zielin

Migrant Mexican families, such as the one pictured here in 1936, often followed crop cycles around the country during the Great Depression, harvesting peas in California and beets in Michigan, for example. Thousands of these workers — many of whom were legal U.S. citizens — were rounded up for deportation and forced to return to Mexico.



FACULTY

The Depression, Deportation, and Detroit

Maria Coter works to create a museum that will remember the thousands of Mexicans unjustly deported during the 1930s

WHEN THE GREAT DEPRESSION HIT DETROIT and jobs dried up, non-whites were usually the first to lose employment. In the Motor City, this didn't just mean blacks. Mexican laborers were not only let go, but were systematically targeted for deportation. Thousands were forced back across the border throughout the '30s.



RIVERA'S RAIL CARS

In 1932, as Diego Rivera was painting his landmark *Detroit Industry* mural for the Detroit Institute of the Arts, the U.S. and Mexican governments were collaborating to repatriate Mexican workers. Rivera wanted the process to be more humane in Michigan than it was elsewhere in the country, where groups were rounded up, Gestapo-style, and forced south. Rivera's goal was to protect the rights of those who returned safely to Mexico. He paid for rail cars to take workers across the Mexican border, where they'd been promised property. However, the dream wasn't to be realized. The U.S. and Mexican governments failed to provision the workers and the land was largely tracts of desert. The communities collapsed, and most Mexican workers eventually returned to the United States.

"During the Depression, there was a lot of anxiety, as there is now, that Mexican workers were taking the jobs that people needed," says Associate Professor Maria Cotera, who is studying and teaching this tragic aspect of American history, called the Mexican repatriation. "All Mexicans became suspects, regardless of whether they were citizens." More than one million Mexicans throughout the United States were rounded up, forced onto trains, and taken back to Mexico without due process. More than sixty percent of them were U.S. citizens.

"Whether or not certain members of a family were citizens, they all went," says Cotera. "It's a legal and moral and ethical lapse by the U.S. government." By the 1940s, Cotera says many "crossed back into the United States illegally, and didn't realize they were actually U.S. citizens."

Cotera, who is the director of LSA's Latina/o Studies Program, has highlighted this often-overlooked chapter in U.S. history in courses for undergraduates, which feature the testimonies of repatriated Detroiters collected by Detroit community historian Elena Herrada. Cotera and Herrada soon realized there was another group that needed the same information students were getting: new immigrants into the Latino community who lacked the historical perspective of older immigrants.

"The new immigrants don't know the older immigrants' stories, especially about

repatriation, and it can be a source of tension between the two groups," Cotera says.

With the help of Herrada, who directs the Oral Histories project with the Detroit-based organization Fronteras Norteñas, Cotera began to envision a museum project that would share information about the repatriation and help "the older and newer immigrant communities come together," says Cotera.

Through a University of Michigan Arts of Citizenship grant, Cotera has started plans for El Museo del Norte, or Museum of the North. The museum will capture the stories of not just repatriated Mexicans, but also the larger migration stories of Puerto Ricans, South Americans, and even those who came to Michigan internally from California, Texas, and Nevada. Cotera says the goal is to highlight the shared history of the groups, emphasizing similarities over differences.

Given the constricted economy and the limited funds available for projects focusing on culture and the arts, El Museo del Norte will start as a small "mobile museum" that can be easily taken on the road to high-density Latino populations. The content of the museum will be created from "photos, letters, documents, oral narratives and more, both in Spanish and English," Cotera says.

The goal is to have the mobile museum on the road by spring 2012. The long-term goal of the project is to create a full-fledged museum in Southwest Detroit.

"There have been many tragic events throughout our human history, but the trick is to turn these events into learning opportunities for generations to come," says Cotera. "That can only be done through teaching, storytelling, and reflection. It strikes me that there is no better place to do these things than in a museum." ■

Sources for this article include: Balderman F., Rodriguez R., *Decade of Betrayal. Mexican repatriation in the 1930s* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006). Valdez, Dennis Nodin (1988), Mexican Revolutionary Nationalism and Repatriation during the Great Depression, *Mexican Studies*, 4(1):1-23.

Maria Cotera, pictured here in Detroit's Mexicantown, says Latino history in the United States has focused mostly on the Southwest. But Michigan's auto factories and beet fields once brought Latinos to the state in large numbers, and today Latinos represent one of the fastest-growing populations in Michigan according to Census data.

