When I was teaching high school in the 1970s I could always count on getting the right answer when I asked my students to identify César Chávez. Today when I ask teens the same question I get a lot of blank stares—and once someone blurted out, "Oh, isn't he that famous boxer (referring to the hugely popular former champion from Mexico, Julio César Chávez)?" A generation removed from the Chicano civil rights era, many of our high school students today have no idea who the really heroic César was—the labor organizer and champion of justice for farm workers. Moreover, younger students today, Latinos and non-Latinos alike, have little if any exposure to the history of the largest Latino group in the United States, Mexican Americans.

Given the growing importance of Mexican Americans and other Latinos in our country today and in its future, it behooves all of us to better understand their history as part of our common historical experience. I tell students in my classes that what I want most for them to take away from my courses is enough knowledge about Mexican Americans in relation to other Americans so that they can better understand a television newscast or newspaper story dealing with Mexican American issues. I want them to know how ethnic groups have experienced life in the United States in the past so that they can better understand what makes today's Mexican Americans "tick." In that spirit I want to discuss some central themes in Mexican American history that secondary and college teachers might incorporate into their teaching of the history of the American West: land loss, migration, and the Chicano movement.

There is no issue more important for understanding the Mexican American experience than land loss. Had Mexican Americans retained control of the millions of acres of land they lost to Anglo-Americans after the war with Mexico ended in 1848, we might all be living in a very different kind of United States today. After all, in the mid-nineteenth century, land not only was the greatest source of wealth but also rooted in it, of course, were social status and the economic power and political influence to maintain it over generations. Like many of the less savory aspects of American history, there has been a tendency to gloss over this sensitive, yet vital, aspect of history. How can we more fully explain to students how Mexican Americans became and largely have remained economically and politically powerless throughout their history if we do not treat dispossession as something more than "the fortunes of war," as too often has been the case?

This is not a call for teachers to embrace an uncritical historical revisionism for the sake of political correctness—it is simply a challenge to engage students in more substantive discussions of important issues based on critical use of readily available scholarship and other strategies. Chicano historical studies (produced mostly, but not only, by Mexican Americans) have matured past the point of simplistic "us versus them" interpretations of the past (1). Unlike thirty years ago when I was desperately looking for any materials in order to teach a high school survey course in Mexican American history, today teachers can count on a sophisticated and increasingly diverse body of historical scholarship to deepen their understanding of any number of issues in Mexican American history. Take my earlier question about Mexican Americans' enduring powerlessness. No one has dealt with that query more convincingly (and even-handedly) than Albert Camarillo in his book *Chicanos in a Changing Society* (1979). Giving race due consideration while also establishing the importance of economic factors and other developments that shaped post-Mexican War California, Camarillo convincingly explains how it came to be that generations of Mexican Americans became "stuck" in a lower social status. With equal sophistication, David Montejano's *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* (1987) significantly revamped our understanding of Mexican Americans in Texas. His book offers a race/class analysis that paints a more complicated picture of what it has been like to be Mexican in Texas, including why some Mexican Americans were more successful in some parts of the state than in others and how changing economic developments as well as shifting racial attitudes molded those experiences.

I am not suggesting high school teachers assign these books to their students, although excerpts may certainly be appropriate for advanced classes. But these are classics in Chicano history and should be essential summer reading for teachers who can master their arguments and distill them for students as a segue into class discussions. As for student readings, short primary documents work best for the nineteenth century. A well-chosen letter, diary entry, or newspaper article really can turn students on to history! Students are much more apt to feel the effects of Mexican American land loss when they read about it in the words of someone who experienced it than when they read or hear it second-hand. Consequently, they are more "primed" for discussion than they might otherwise be. Here again, we are fortunate to have good published sources from which to choose appropriate short readings of actual voices from the past. David Weber's collection of primary documents, *Foreigners in Their Native Land* (1973), has been around for...
many years and is still very useful. More recently the volume Major Problems in Mexican American History (1999), edited by Zaragosa Vargas, is also an excellent resource.

Along with land loss it is vital to understand the role migration has played in Mexican American history. Here the central point is that, although we are a nation of immigrants, not all immigrant experiences are the same, and we should not expect to understand Mexican immigration and incorporation into the United States by thinking of it in terms of the traditional European model. Indeed, some of the differences would seem obvious—no ocean separates the countries, and Mexicans were first incorporated through wars—or as the saying goes, “The border crossed us; we did not cross the border.” Furthermore, racism has dogged Mexican immigrants (and native-born) far longer and more virulently than it did any European group that at some given time suffered from American anti-immigrant hysteria and nativism. Still, most historians and the general public alike mistakenly continue to try to make sense of Mexican immigration by comparing it to the European experience.

In the absence of a full-blown survey of Mexican immigration, teachers can get good insights into this issue from the book by George Sanchez, Becoming Mexican American (1993), and also from his journal article, “Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigration Studies” (2). To spice up the topic for students, teachers can use excerpts from interviews conducted by the pioneering Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio in the early twentieth century. His volume, The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant (1931), offers excellent vignettes told not only by immigrants but also by native-born Mexican Americans (3). Many Mexican American students will easily relate to these narratives given their own experiences or those of relatives and friends, and because of the current prominence of the immigration issue. Tensions between native-born and immigrants swirl uncomfortably around us today, as they have historically, and they are present in any school as well. When approached with sensitivity and engaging short readings, the study of Mexican American immigration history offers a golden opportunity to educate all our students about an important contemporary issue.

The topic of immigration from Mexico overlaps with internal migration by native-born Mexican Americans. The pattern of leaving school early in spring and registering late in fall because of migrant farm work is a well-known aspect of the Mexican American experience, but it is something we usually hear about only in a negative light—in talking about Mexican American poverty, family instability, and educational underachievement. What about the many stories of triumph that arise from that same setting? It is important for students to learn about the harsh realities of oppression Mexican American have faced, but it is also important that they hear other equally real stories of success. In practically any Mexican American community today, there are men and women who have left behind the migrant stream or other forms of poverty and built very successful and enviable lives. Teachers should invite some of those everyday heroes into their classrooms to share their experiences, or assign students to conduct oral history interviews in their own communities. Students can also explore the migrant world through a number of published accounts suitable for them. One engrossing story is the highly acclaimed short novel (published in bilingual format), y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Part (1971), by Tomás Rivera. More recently, Elva Treviño Hart has poignantly revealed some of the struggles of migrant women through her highly accessible autobiography, Barefoot Heart (1999). As for instructors’ readings, historian Sarah Deutsch significantly enriched our understanding of how gender has functioned in Mexican American migration and cultural preservation.
Teachers can use her book, No Separate Refuge (1987), to dispel some of the stereotypes about gender roles in Mexican American culture and to learn about women's adaptive roles that were crucial in sustaining a "regional community" based on labor migration in New Mexico and southern Colorado. Lastly, teachers who want to learn more about women in Mexican American history should look to the work of Vicki Ruiz, who has done more than any other historian to promote the study of Mexican American women's struggles for equality.

Those struggles have a long history, of course, but they burst onto the scene most dramatically and successfully in the 1960s and 1970s during the Chicano movement, and are captured in a very useful book of short documents by Alma M. Garcia, Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings (1997). The Chicano movement is another major theme secondary teachers should emphasize. Today, too many high school graduates have a very limited understanding of the U.S. civil rights era, associating it narrowly with Martin Luther King Jr. and the black freedom struggle, rather than with the many individuals and groups that also fought for equality in the sixties and seventies, sometimes alongside African Americans—women, gays, Native Americans, Asians, and of course Chicanas and Chicanos. This is not meant to detract from African American history, to rank the importance of any people's history, or to point the finger of blame in any way. It is simply a reminder of our collective responsibility to keep Dr. King's dream alive by consciously striving to learn more about each other. Teachers can play a powerful role in this by helping today's young people discover the larger, more inclusive meaning of civil rights history and its connections to their own lives.

Far-fetched? Idealistic? I don't think so. When students learn that Mexican Americans have suffered and triumphed and done great and not-so-great things—just like other people—they begin to see them in a different, more positive light. In talks I have given about Mexican American history to high school students over the years, two of the most consistent reactions I have gotten from non-Latinos (and even sometimes from Mexican Americans) go something like this: "Oh, I didn't know they'd had it that bad!" And, "Wow, she was pretty brave: that was cool, the way she stood up!" In a time of increasing uneasiness between African Americans and Latinos, it is our responsibility to find common ground in our shared history.

Again, teachers can enhance their knowledge and teaching of aspects of Mexican American civil rights history by tapping into the increasing number of published sources related to the Chicano movement. In recent years several books have appeared about some of the major figures and organizations of the movement, including biographies of César Chávez, the memoirs of José Ángel Gutiérrez and Reies López Tijerina, the collected speeches of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, and case studies about different activist organizations and the youth movement. These are books written by people who were intimately involved in the fight for Chicano civil rights. They give us unique, first-hand perspectives into a critical era in Mexican American history.

Luckily, many veterans of these civil rights campaigns live and work among us; they may be the next-door neighbor, a local doctor, social worker, or lawyer, even the teacher or principal down the hall. And, they are often glad to share their experiences with students in classroom presentations or through interviews. In addition, there are good visual and other materials teachers may use. Nothing captures the attention of today's students as well as a good video. Particularly effective for learning and teaching about the Chicano movement is the four-part public television series, Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement (1996). This landmark documentary covers the themes of land, labor, educational reform, and political empowerment and never fails to rivet students' attention and ignite discussion. There are other good films made during the movement years or shortly after, including I am Joaquin (1969) and Chicano Park (1988). Although these may be more difficult to find, they are worth searching for in university and large public libraries. Lastly—with regard to visual materials—teachers, students, and professional researchers alike will find a gold mine in the seventy-seven videotaped interviews conducted by Chicano activist-professor José Angel Gutiérrez and reposited at the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of Texas at Arlington. This collection, Tejano Voices, is fully transcribed and digitized for easy online access. Researchers can read the transcripts or listen to the actual voices of these Mexican American men and women as they recount their struggles for civil rights.

Clearly, there are other important themes in Mexican American history I could highlight; these three—land loss, migration, and the Chicano movement—are ones I have found students really respond to and would seem central to understanding the history of Mexican Americans. What is most important is not so much the particular topics teachers choose to include but how they are handled. We know that students' perceptions about a teacher's fairness and sincerity greatly affect their openness to learning. Dealing with some of the themes suggested here, especially through discussion sessions, requires ground rules, as well as a genuinely open and respectful atmosphere. Teachers should expect emotions to surface—not only anger from Mexican American students who confront disturbing information for the first time, but also defensiveness or hostility from non-Mexican Americans.
especially whites, for whom these kinds of discussions may trigger a sense of guilt or isolation. Both kinds of responses are normal and should be handled openly and with appropriate sensitivity so that all students can grow intellectually and emotionally.

What I have called for here is not simply to teach particular aspects of Mexican American history and integrate them into the history of the American West. I am challenging teachers to leave their comfort zones in order to really awaken students to the relevance of history now and in their future. It is a tall order and easier said than done, I know. But it is also a golden opportunity for teachers to make a real difference.

Endnotes


6. The Tejano Voices collection is accessible at <http://libraries.uta.edu/tejanovoice>.

References and Resources


