

Mexicano Contributions to the Southwest

17.1 Introduction

The Texas war of independence and the war with Mexico in the 1840s had a lasting effect on the people of the Southwest. Spanish-speaking people had made their homes in the region since the days of the conquistadors in the 1500s. By 1848, from 80,000 to 100,000 *Mexicanos*, or Mexican citizens, lived in the territories given up by Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Most of these people remained in the Southwest and became citizens of the United States.

The treaty with Mexico promised Mexican Americans full citizenship rights, the right to keep their property, and the right to use their language. These promises were not kept. Armed with the belief that they were a superior people, white settlers pushed Mexicanos off their land. Whites also made it illegal for Mexicano children to speak Spanish in schools. They found ways to keep Mexicanos from exercising their right to vote.

Mexicanos protested each of these assaults on their rights. But the government did little to protect them. Before long, Mexican Americans found themselves, in the words of one historian, “foreigners in their native land.”

The problems of prejudice, poverty, and the lack of political power persisted well into the 20th century. Despite much progress, many of these problems remain today.

Yet Mexican Americans also had a deep influence on their new country. Even though most white settlers had little respect for Mexican Americans, they freely borrowed much that was useful from the Mexican **heritage**. Spanish words and Mexican foods, laws, technology, and architecture all became a lasting part of the culture of the Southwest. In this chapter, you will learn about these and other contributions that Mexicanos made to American life.

17.2 Mexicano Mining Contributions

Mining in the West developed in three waves—gold, silver, and copper. Each wave depended on the contribution of Mexican miners. Mexicanos came to the Southwest with a rich mining **tradition**. They knew where to look for precious metals and how to get them out of the ground.

Gold Mining The Americans who rushed to California in 1849 had many skills. But they knew nothing about mining. Mexicanos introduced them to the batea, or gold pan. Miners scooped up mud from streambeds with the batea. Then they swished it around to wash away the lightweight sand. The heavier flakes of gold sank to the bottom of the pan.

Mexicanos also brought the riffle box to the goldfields. The bottom of this long box was crossed with pieces of wood called riffles. As mud washed through the box, the heavy gold sank and was trapped behind the riffles. The riffle box was used extensively by both American and Chinese miners.

Before long, miners discovered that the gold they were picking up in streams came from veins of quartz rock in the Sierra Nevada. Quartz mining was a mystery to Americans, but it was familiar to Mexicanos. Mexicanos taught other miners how to dig the quartz out of mountains. They also showed miners how to use a simple arrastra, or grinding mill, to crush the rock so they could easily remove the gold.

Silver and Copper Mining A Mexican miner sparked the West’s first big silver strike. In 1859, a prospector named Henry Comstock was looking for gold in Nevada. Much to his annoyance, his gold was mixed with a lot of worthless “blue stuff.” One day, a Mexicano miner looked at the blue stuff and started shouting, “Mucha plata! Mucha plata!” (“Much silver!”) In its first 20 years, the Comstock lode yielded over \$300 million in silver and gold.

Mexicanos discovered copper in the Southwest in the early 1800s. When Americans began to mine copper in Arizona, they turned to Mexican miners for help. By 1940, Arizona mines had produced \$3 billion worth of copper—copper that carried electricity and telephone calls to millions of homes across America.

17.3 Cattle Ranching

Cattle ranching in the West was built upon traditions brought north from Mexico. Spanish colonists imported the first cattle to the Americas. The animals **adapted** well to the dry conditions of Mexico and the American Southwest. In time, millions of Spanish cattle ran wild in Texas and California.

Spanish cattle were thin, wiry creatures with long, wide-spreading horns. They moved quickly and were dangerous. Californios (Mexicanos in California) often found themselves dodging behind trees or diving into ditches to escape the charge of an angry longhorn.

With cattle so abundant, Californios and Tejanos (Mexicanos in Texas) found ranching to be a good business. So did the Americans who learned the cattle business from Mexican rancheros, or ranchers.

The Rancho Western cattle ranching was nothing like dairy farming in the East. Dairy farms in the East were small family businesses that produced mostly milk, butter, and cheese. Compared to these farms, western ranchos were huge. In

the arid Southwest, large grants of land were needed to provide enough food and water for cattle herds. Instead of dairy products, the main products of ranchos were meat, hides, and tallow.

Ranch life followed traditions that had been developed in Spain and perfected in Mexico. Rancheros spent most of their day on horseback, overseeing their land and herds. Caring for the cattle was the work of hired vaqueros, or cowboys.

The Roundup Among the vaqueros' most important jobs were the rodeo, or roundup, and branding (using a hot iron to burn a mark into the hide of cattle). Branding was essential because herds belonging to different owners mixed together on unfenced grasslands. To avoid conflicts, every owner had to mark his cattle with a distinctive brand.

During the rodeo, vaqueros drove unbranded calves to a roundup area. There, the calves were branded with the brand their mothers bore.

As Americans took up ranching, they adopted the rancheros' practice of branding cattle. Along with cowboys and the roundup, cattle brands are still part of ranch life in the West.

17.4 The Cowboy

Hollywood movies make it seem that nothing is more American than the western cowboy. Cowboys, however, learned their job from the Mexican vaquero. Across the Southwest, vaqueros were admired for their skill at riding, roping, and handling cattle. American cowboys adopted the vaqueros' clothes and gear, and much of their language.

Cowboy Clothes and Gear From head to toe, cowboys dressed in clothing borrowed from the vaqueros. For example, the cowboys' "ten-gallon hats," which shaded their eyes and sometimes served as a water pail or a pillow, came from the vaqueros' wide-brimmed sombreros. The leather chaps that protected the cowboys' legs from cacti and sagebrush were modeled on the vaqueros' chaparreras. The high-heeled, pointed-toe boots that slipped so easily into the cowboys' stirrups were based on the vaqueros' botas. Even the poncho that protected cowboys from cold and rain was borrowed from the vaqueros.

Mexicanos also invented the western (or cowboy) saddle, with its useful horn. The saddles brought to America from Europe did not have horns. When a vaquero on a European saddle roped a steer, he had to tie his rope to the horse's tail to keep it anchored. This method was hard on both the horse and the rider. By adding a horn to the saddle, vaqueros made their job easier—and their horses' job as well.

Cowboys borrowed another essential piece of gear from the vaqueros—la riata (the lariat). Vaqueros were masters of the art of throwing a 60-foot rope long distances with amazing accuracy. This skill was especially useful for roping calves during a roundup. In a remarkable display of roping skill, a vaquero named José Romero once roped a full-grown eagle right out of the sky!

Cowboy Lingo American cowboys borrowed or adapted many ranching words from the vaqueros as well. The terms bronco, stampede, corral, lasso, burro, buckaroo, and vamoose all come from Spanish-Mexican words. So do mesa, canyon, mesquite, chaparral, and other terms used to describe the southwestern landscape. The cowboy slang word for jail, hoosegow, came from the Spanish juzgado. And of course, the terms ranch and rancher came from rancho and rancho.

17.5 Sheep Raising

In New Mexico, the most important industry was sheep raising. From the founding of the province up to the Mexican Cession, sheep fed, clothed, and supported Spanish and Mexican settlers.

The Spanish brought a long tradition of sheep raising to the Americas. Two kinds of sheep were raised in Spain—the beautiful merinos with their fine wool, and the ugly churros with their coarse wool. The Spanish brought the scrawny churro to New Mexico, and for good reason. This tough little sheep knew how to survive in a dry environment like that of the Southwest.

The Spanish Sheep-Raising System When Americans came to New Mexico, they did not think of sheep raising as a business. In the East, a farmer might raise a few sheep as a sideline, but not large herds. Once they saw the Spanish sheep-raising system in New Mexico, however, some Americans changed their minds.

Under the Spanish system, sheep raising was a big, well-organized business. The Spanish governor of New Mexico, for example, once owned 2 million sheep and employed 2,700 workers.

At the top of this business stood the patron, or owner of the herds. Below him were several layers of managers. These supervisors and range bosses spent their days on horseback, checking range conditions and the health of the sheep.

The lowest-level worker was the pastor, or herder. Each pastor was responsible for 1,500 to 2,000 sheep. A pastor stayed with his flock night and day, slowly guiding it from place to place so that the sheep could graze as they moved.

During spring lambing season, the pastor assisted with difficult births, cared for orphaned lambs, and helped the newborns survive. One pastor described this busy time as a “month-long hell of worry and toil.”

Americans Adopt the Spanish System Americans soon adopted the Spanish system as their own. Large-scale sheep raising spread from New Mexico across the Southwest. In California, the churro was crossed with the merino to produce a sheep with far better wool. As a result, between 1862 and 1880, U.S. wool production soared from 5 million to 22 million pounds a year.

17.6 Irrigated Farming

Americans coming to the Southwest knew as little about irrigated farming as they did about mining, cattle ranching, and sheep raising. In the East, enough rain fell year-round to water a farmer’s crops. **Irrigation** was unnecessary and unknown. But in the Southwest, where six months could go by with no rain, irrigation was essential.

Mexican settlers in the Southwest brought with them irrigation techniques that had been developed centuries earlier in Spain and North Africa. They borrowed other techniques from the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. When settlers first arrived, the Pueblos were irrigating between 15,000 and 25,000 acres of crop land in the arid Rio Grande Valley.

The Mexican System of Irrigation Bringing water to fields involved an enormous amount of work. First, farmers had to redirect water from local streams to their fields. They began by building a dam of rocks, earth, and brush across the stream. The water that backed up behind the dam was brought to the fields by irrigation ditches.

To keep from wasting this precious water, Mexicanos carefully leveled their fields. Then they divided the fields into squares. Each square was marked off by a wall of earth high enough to hold in water. When one square had been soaked with water, farmers made a hole in its wall. The water then flowed to the next square. The farmers continued in this way until the entire field was soaked. This method of irrigation was known as “the Mexican system.”

America’s Fruit Basket Using crops introduced by Mexicanos and the Mexican system of irrigation, American settlers turned the South-west into America’s fruit basket. Among the many fruits brought by Mexicanos to the Southwest were grapes, dates, olives, apples, walnuts, pears, plums, peaches, apricots, and quinces. Mexicano settlers also brought the first citrus fruits—lemons, limes, and oranges—to the region. Many of these fruits were unknown in the East, where the climate was too cold for them to grow. But they thrived in sunny Arizona and California. With the help of Mexicano farmworkers, American farmers transformed dry deserts into irrigated fruit orchards and citrus groves.

17.7 Mexican Food

In 1835, William Heath Davis became one of the first Americans to settle in California. There he got his first taste of Mexican food. Davis later wrote of the Californios:

Their tables were frugally [simply] furnished, the food clean and inviting, consisting mainly of good beef broiled on an iron rod, or steaks with onions, also mutton [sheep], chicken, eggs.... The bread was tortillas; sometimes made with yeast. Beans were a staple dish.... Their meat stews were excellent when not too highly seasoned with red pepper.

Davis may not have known it, but the food he was enjoying in California brought together the best of two worlds.

A Food Revolution The conquest of Mexico in 1521 began one of the great food revolutions in history. The Spanish came to Mexico in search of gold, but the greatest treasures they found were Indian foods unknown in Europe. These “New World” foods included corn, tomatoes, chocolate, peanuts, vanilla, beans, squash, avocados, coconuts, sunflower seeds, and chili peppers.

The Spanish shipped these new foods back to Spain. From there they spread throughout Europe, greatly expanding people’s food choices.

In turn, the Spanish brought the foods of the “Old World” to Mexico. They introduced meats such as pork, beef, lamb, chicken, and goat. They brought nuts and grains such as almonds, walnuts, rice, wheat, and barley. They planted fruits and vegetables such as apples, oranges, grapes, olives, lettuce, carrots, sugarcane, and potatoes (which they discovered in Peru). And they introduced herbs and spices such as cinnamon, parsley, coriander, oregano, and black pepper.

A New Style of Cooking Mexican cooks combined these Old and New World foods to create a rich and flavorful style of cooking that was neither Indian nor Spanish. It was distinctly Mexican.

As Americans settled the Southwest, they were introduced to Mexican food. Many of them liked the new tastes, and they borrowed recipes from Mexicano cooks. In Texas, the mingling of Mexican and American dishes resulted in a style

of cooking known as “Tex-Mex.” And across America, a spicy stew of beef and beans known simply as “chili” became as American as apple pie.

17.8 Spanish-style Architecture

Throughout the Southwest, the Mexicano contribution to architecture is easy to see. Many buildings can be found with the thick walls, red tile roofs, rounded arches, and courtyards that are typical of Spanish architecture.

Spanish architecture took root in Mexico during the colonial period. Mexican settlers brought their knowledge of this tradition to the Southwest. Their missions, homes, and other structures were simple and attractive. And they were ideally suited to the hot, dry climate of the Southwest.

Adobe Buildings Since wood was sparse in the Southwest, Mexicanos used adobe bricks as their main building material. Adobe is a mixture of earth, grass, and water that is shaped into bricks and baked in the sun. Mexicanos covered their adobe homes with colorful red clay tiles. Besides being attractive and fireproof, a tile roof kept the adobe walls from being washed away during heavy rains.

Many adobe buildings featured patios and verandas. A patio is a roofless inner courtyard, often located at the center of a home. A veranda is a roofed porch or balcony extending along the outside of a building. Patios and verandas allowed Mexicanos to spend much of their time outdoors while still protected from the hot sun and dry desert winds.

Newcomers Adopt the Spanish Style Americans moving to the Southwest quickly saw the advantages of building with adobe. Because of their thick walls, adobe structures stayed cooler in summer and warmer in winter than the wood buildings that Americans from the East were used to. Adobe structures could also be easily constructed from locally available materials.

American settlers used adobe to build not only homes, but also courthouses, trading posts, post offices, and other buildings. Later, builders adapted Spanish architecture to new materials such as concrete and stucco. By the 1930s, nearly a million Spanish-style homes had been built in California. “Who would live in a structure of wood and brick if they could get a palace of mud?” wrote an admiring easterner. “The adobes to me [make] the most picturesque and comfortable [homes]...and harmonize...with the whole nature of the landscape.”

17.9 Mexican Laws

The Mexicanos of the Southwest were used to being governed by Mexican laws. These laws often differed from American law. For example, Mexico had outlawed slavery in 1829. Slaves from the American South sometimes ran away to find freedom in Mexican settlements. (Recall that Mexico’s abolition of slavery was one of the issues that led Texans to fight for their independence from Mexico.)

In time, both Mexican and American legal traditions would shape laws in the West. Particularly important were Mexicano laws governing mining, water, and community property.

Mining Law Before the discovery of gold in California, there was so little mining in the United States that Americans had no mining law. Once in the goldfields, the forty-miners desperately needed rules to keep order.

With the help of Mexicano miners, Americans developed a “law of the mines” based on Mexican mining law. California miners later carried this law of the mines to other parts of the Southwest.

Water Law The water law brought west by Americans worked well enough in the East, where rainfall was abundant. Under American law, water flowing across a field or farm belonged to the owner of that land. Landowners could use their water in whatever ways they wanted.

This principle did not work well in the West, where water was scarce and precious. Disputes over who controlled streams led to endless legal conflicts and even water wars.

To end these conflicts, settlers wrote new laws based on Mexican “pueblo law.” Pueblo law said that water was too valuable to be owned or controlled by any one person. Instead, water belonged to an entire community and should be used for the benefit of all.

Community Property Law For women, the most important legal principle borrowed from Mexican law was the idea of community property. In eastern states, married women had few property rights. Any property acquired by a married couple—such as a home, farm, or business—belonged solely to the husband.

In contrast, Mexican law said that all property acquired during a marriage was “community property.” If a couple separated, half of that property belonged to the wife, half to the husband.

American settlers liked the idea of sharing the gains of marriage between husband and wife. Today, Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, Washington, Wisconsin, and Louisiana are all community property states.

17.10 Mexicano Entertainments

The Californios, observed William Heath Davis, “were about the happiest and most contented people I ever saw.” Californios worked hard. But they also knew how to entertain themselves with music, dance, and fiestas (celebrations). Americans settling the Southwest shared in these entertainments.

Music and Dancing Mexicano music greatly influenced country and western music in the South-west. The most important contribution was the corrido, or folk ballad. A corrido is a dramatic story sung to the accompaniment of guitars. The subjects of corridos ranged from exciting tales of heroes and bandits to sad songs of love and betrayal.

American settlers greatly admired the color and energy of traditional Mexicano dance. Dancing was an important part of any Mexicano fiesta. Favorite dances included the jota, the fandango, and la bamba. The last of these, the bamba, was danced by a young woman balancing a full glass of water on her head. Generations of schoolchildren learned another popular dance, the jarabe tapatío, or “Mexican hat dance,” as part of their southwestern cultural heritage.

Fiestas and Rodeos Throughout the year, Mexicanos held a variety of religious fiestas. One of the most important honored Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. In San Antonio, Texas, Tejanos marked this day (December 12) with an elaborate procession to the cathedral. After attending church services, the Tejanos danced all night long in their homes.

Today, the most widely celebrated Mexicano holiday is El Cinco de Mayo (the Fifth of May). This holiday commemorates an important victory in Mexico’s fight for independence from French rule in 1862. Cinco de Mayo fiestas bring together Mexican and non-Mexican Americans to enjoy Mexicano music, dance, and food.

For millions of Americans, rodeo is an exciting professional sport. Rodeo’s roots go back to cattle roundups on Mexicano ranchos. During these get-togethers, Mexicano cowboys competed with each other in events such as calf roping, bull riding, and bronco busting. American cowboys joined in these contests, and soon rodeos became annual events in western cities. To its many fans, the rodeo, with its mixed Mexicano and American heritage, represents the best of the West.

17.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about Mexicano contributions to the culture of the Southwest. You used a matrix to organize your information. Movies and television often portray the settling of the West as a story of white pioneers taming the wilderness. As you have seen, the story is not that simple. Long before whites arrived, Mexicanos had learned to survive and even thrive in the harsh landscape of the Southwest. Although often mistreated by pioneers from the East, their knowledge would prove to be more valuable than gold to the newcomers.

American settlers learned about mining, cattle ranching, cowboy life, and sheep raising from Mexicanos. They adopted irrigation techniques that had been pioneered by Mexicanos and by Pueblo Indians. They learned to appreciate Mexicano food. They borrowed the Mexicanos’ architectural styles and laws. And they learned to enjoy Mexicano entertainments.

Today, Mexicano culture survives in such American adaptations as the organization of ranches, Spanish-style homes, popular foods, and legal traditions regarding water and community property. The American language is enriched by Spanish and Mexican words like patio, rodeo, and poncho. From San Francisco to San Antonio, hundreds of place names in the West and Southwest echo the Spanish-Mexican heritage. Millions of Americans celebrate the Mexican holiday Cinco de Mayo. It is hard to imagine what the United States would be like without this rich legacy.