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# **Chicana Historiography: A Research Note Regarding Mexican Archival Sources**

**Barbara A. DRISCOLL**

The historical and cultural legacy of Chicanas, or Mexican women living in the United States, like that of all Americans of Mexican descent, transcends American society and its geopolitical boundary with Mexico. Historic and cultural bonds between Chicanos/as and their kin in Mexico have superseded many obstacles such as geographical distance, political alienation, and societal pressure to “become Americanized”; indeed, these ties have been reinforced by contiguity between the two countries and continuous migration from Mexico and within the United States. Not surprisingly, some of these bonds between Mexico and the Mexican American community in the United States have corresponding historical documentation in Mexican archives.

For the purposes of retrieving documents in Mexican archives, it is important to consider Chicanas in two groups—those Mexican women who lived in the American Southwest before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (i.e., during the colonial and early independence periods) and those who were or became residents of the United States after the Treaty. Moreover, while many Mexican women became residents of the American Southwest by virtue of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, many others over the years have migrated to the United States. Whether by choice or necessity, migration to and within the United States has brought Mexican women to many areas beyond the Southwest, into the Midwest and even the Northwest and Northeast, helping to make Mexican Americans a national minority.

Moreover, as in the case of documenting the history of women in general, we must often look further than the more traditional historical methodologies to identify relevant documents and to assess

their usefulness. To be sure, there are some documents in Mexican archives which refer specifically to "mujeres mexicanas en los Estados Unidos," but most do not. We must consider, then, the full context of the circumstances surrounding the experiences of Mexican women in the United States and their past and present legal and cultural relationship to Mexico to be able to retrieve pertinent documents in that country. For example, it is often necessary to extrapolate material about Chicanas from statistical material that does not even mention females directly, much less Mexican women living in the United States.

For the purposes of this discussion, I use the terms "Chicanas" and "Mexicanas" interchangeably. This is not to say that the terms are synonymous, only that to identify documents in Mexican archives it is necessary to consider all women of Mexican descent living in the United States within the same general category, regardless of nationality. Terms such as "Latinas," "Mexican American women," and "Chicanas" obviously did not come into use until after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and were not recognized by Mexican archival documentation until very recently. Documents generally available in Mexican archives are usually at least thirty-five to forty years old, predating most of the terms presently used.

In this regard, this paper considers some of the innumerable sources of primary historical documentation in Mexico City, as they relate to the historical experience of Chicanas. Some sources pertain to the colonial era, others to the period between the independence of Mexico and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but most have information about the second half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. This list is by no means complete, but it does serve to illustrate the richness of historical data in Mexico and its potential applicability to Chicana history.

### **Archivo General de la Nación**

The Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City ranks among the major archives of the world, is the official depository of the bulk of Mexican government administrative units, and contains the largest concentration of federal government documents in Mexico. The AGN is located near downtown Mexico City in the old

Cárcel de Lecumberri, an impressive starfish-shaped building constructed during the Porfiriato as a modern, progressive prison. While its reputation as a prison is tainted, the applicability of the building to storing historical documents is remarkable. Each arm of the starfish-shaped building is called a *galería*; each *galería* contains a related group of documents.

Papers housed in the AGN include those routinely deposited by successive presidential administrations, executive branch offices and departments, some personal papers of historical figures, some judicial and ecclesiastical material, as well as those documents resulting from periodic reorganizations of the government. The organization and content of the documents vary considerably from *galería* to *galería* and record group to record group. Some *galerías* have very detailed catalogues for some record groups, while other record groups have only recently been made available for research and consequently have only the most general inventory. Moreover, materials from the period 1910-1920, the period of the Mexican Revolution, are very sketchy. It should also be noted that the Archivo does house some visual material, such as old photos.

Fortunately, records and materials at the AGN are quite accessible. Serious researchers with appropriate identification can gain admission to the AGN. Although anyone from any discipline or level of education can find useful information about Mexico or related topics in the AGN, it is most important that any researcher bring as much data as he/she can find to the Archivo. Those data (i.e., names, dates, places, etc.) will greatly assist in locating appropriate documents. AGN personnel who work with the documents in the various *galerías* are exceptionally knowledgeable about the material and generous about sharing their experience.

The following areas of the AGN are some of those relevant to Chicana history.

*Galería Noroeste—Fondo Departamento de Trabajo.* From 1911 to 1923, the Departamento de Migración was part of this office. Although much of the information pertains to male Mexican nationals working in the United States and some to repatriation in the 1930s, there is also material about *sociedades protectoras del trabajador mexicano*, whose benefits often affected workers' wives and families. There is a considerable amount of correspondence from in-

spectors working in Mexican border states and along the border, about insurance and death benefit claims for wives and widows of Mexican workers. Undoubtedly, some of these wives and widows may have gone to the United States to live and work. This Fondo also contains lists of individuals who migrated within Mexico in search of work, including those who went to the border and to the United States—one of the variables in these lists being sex. The Fondo de Trabajo is one of the groups of documents that has only the most general inventory at present.

*Galería Noreste.* The documents from presidential administrations are deposited in this *galería*. Most of the earlier administrations have detailed card catalogues, although it is necessary to be careful and thoughtful in using them to locate information about Chicanos. The presidential papers, in particular, contain some correspondence from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores about Mexican citizens living in the United States. Fondo Alvaro Obregón-Plutarco Calles (1920-1928) contains a series entitled "Migración y Repatriación." Reports and related material pertain to the repatriations of the 1930s and attendant problems. Many Mexican women, some with their children, were isolated in the United States during the repatriation, sometimes without their husbands. There are many reports about consuls assisting Mexican women suffering from the consequences of the repatriations.

Fondo Pascual Ortiz (1930-1932) has a number of requests for various kinds of assistance in solving problems arising from the repatriations, as well as many other documents from Mexican consuls in San Francisco and Denver not necessarily found in archives of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. Some of these documents concern Mexican women living in the United States.

Fondos Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1932-1934) and Lazaro Cardenas (1934-1940) both contain a series on reports submitted by the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, many of which were submitted by Mexican consuls in the United States. One of the reports, for example, was about a complaint submitted by a Mexican woman against the Mexican consul in Chicago, who actively interfered in her divorce proceedings.

*Galería Este.* The Fondo Patronato Eclesiástico contains exten-

sive church records from all Mexico for extended periods time. Of relevance to Chicanas are church records for those parts of Mexico that became the American Southwest and today's Mexican border areas. Since the church as part of its missionary work documented rites that were performed (i.e., baptisms, marriages), many churches accumulated extensive statistical and clerical material about their parishioners. For example, there is a series on *matrimonios* and another on *viudez* (widowhood). Statistical information about the church in the Californias, in Texas, and in New Mexico before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo contains interesting data about the population of females of Mexican descent that later became Chicanas.

*Galería Sureste*. Fondo Gobernación: here we must remember that from 1821 to 1861 the Secretaria de Gobernación with a Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores acted in the capacity of SRE today, and that a substantial amount of information remains to be classified.

From 1830 to 1853, there was an office of Censo and Estadística, which was charged with development of statistical information about the country. It contains lists of inhabitants, property owners, and so forth. Those sections pertaining to what is today the American Southwest contain some interesting information about the populace of that region. Fondo Gobernación also has *cuadros estadísticas* about migration developed by *aduanas* (customs), some of which are located at the border, for the years 1911 to 1919.

Fomento de las Californias, active from 1823 to 1853, contains reports about the region.

From this brief list it is obvious that the Archivo General de la Nación contains rich and diverse sources of information pertaining to Chicana history. We must remember, however, that primary historical material in the AGN pertinent to Chicanas is not readily apparent. A researcher must have a working knowledge of Mexican institutional history, as well as an understanding of the historical experience of Mexican women living in the United States, to be able to identify and retrieve documents.

### Archivo Microfilmeco de Genealogía y Heráldica

Associated with the Academia Mexicana de Genealogía y Heráldica, and with the Mormon church, this vast collection of microfilm of parish registers in Mexico from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries makes it a major source of social and demographic data for Mexico. Most complete coverage is for the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Records include baptisms, marriages, *informaciones matrimoniales*, confirmations, and deaths, in some cases supplemented by civil registers. Mexican states that have been filmed include the border states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Chihuahua. Although it does not contain information about Mexican women in the United States per se, it can provide indispensable historical demographic data about Mexican females in border cities that have sent immigrants and workers to the United States.

### Hemeroteca Nacional de México

One can certainly not overlook the Hemeroteca Nacional de México in Mexico City as a source of information on Chicanas. It is the central depository for newspapers published in Mexico City, and contains complete runs of many of the major newspapers, such as *Excélsior*, and some regional papers as well. There is a catalogue for the newspapers, and if the researcher is prepared with names, dates, and places, it is possible to locate material relevant to Mexican women living on the border and in the American Southwest.

### Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores

The most accessible source of primary information for Chicana history in Mexico City is the Archivo de la Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores in Tlatelolco. It serves as the official depository for the Secretaría's documents and houses those documents which it generates and those it receives from other governments and groups as well as from its own personnel located in other countries. The range of information is vast, including confidential memos about

high-level diplomatic negotiations, interdepartmental correspondence, and specialized reports (*informes*) about a variety of topics.

Of particular value to the history of Chicana and Mexican women in the United States are the various *informes* and other paperwork local Mexican consuls were required to perform as part of their job. Indeed, the Mexican consul in his capacity as the representative of the Mexican government was delegated certain obligations by the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores toward the local Mexican community, and it is no coincidence that there were consuls in areas with large Mexican communities, at least in the early part of the twentieth century.

A principal function of Mexican consuls was and is *protección*. This means that the consul's responsibility was actively to protect the rights of Mexican citizens while they resided in another country, even if that entailed acting in the capacity of liaison with the host society. As it was explained in an interview with an official of the Dirección de Protección of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, certain rights bestowed by Mexican citizenship are not negated by residence in another country. Local Mexican consuls theoretically constitute the legal conduit between Mexican citizens living abroad and their home government, and between them and the host society's infrastructure.

Most consuls routinely submitted reports about their activities in the area of *protección*, the nature of which varied with the demands of the circumstances and the location. But it does seem that they often assisted Mexican women and officiated on their behalf in a variety of situations. For example, they often helped female members of the local Mexican community recover insurance and pension benefits for injured and killed workers, generally their husbands or fathers. Paperwork expediting these claims often required additional procedures when noncitizens were involved; since the wives were usually the beneficiaries, many reports were sent to Mexico about consuls processing insurance benefits.

Mexican consuls, moreover, were required to compile statistical and demographic data about Mexican citizens living in their district. First, Mexican citizens were supposed to register their names and so forth with the local consul. These lists, called *matriculas* or *registros civiles*, were then submitted to Mexico City. Mexican consuls also



maintained lists of local marriages of Mexican citizens, and of *nacimientos* or births. To be sure, it can be said that significant groups of Mexicans—in particular women, especially nonaffiliated women—did not register this information with the local consulate and that these data might well be biased against poor and uneducated women; but the fact remains that they do provide an important source of information.

Significantly, Mexican consuls also transmitted reports to Mexico City at other times, apart from their scheduled ones about many different topics. Therefore, one finds interesting, albeit sporadic *informes* about miscellaneous topics. For example, the consul in Los Angeles around 1930 submitted *informes* about the activities of a group called Madres Mexicanas. Another Mexican consul took the initiative to write an *informe* about married Mexican women in the United States (1932). In 1918, another consul sent one about the deportation of Mexican women from the United States for prostitution. Interestingly, Cipriano Hernandez submitted a report to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores in 1931 about Mexican families in Chicago. The consul in San Antonio informed the SRE in 1929 about a group of families who wanted to be repatriated as *colonias*. Moreover, most consuls reported quite regularly on mutual aid societies.

Paperwork submitted to Mexico City by Mexican consuls in the United States for the nineteenth century is sketchy and inconsistent on the topic of Chicanas. A few *informes* about *protección* were sent, and some *matriculas* were submitted, but they are sketchy and of very limited use. Moreover, since the migration north to urban areas in the United States where consuls were stationed was limited in the nineteenth century, their reports to Mexico were infrequent.

However, the consul documents and *informes* submitted from the United States between 1900 and 1940 provide a substantial amount of information about Chicanas. There were many consuls all over the United States, at least ten in Texas alone, at least four in California and New Mexico, several in Arizona, Chicago, and St. Louis, and active ones in New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Colorado with the consul general being located in New York. Many of these cities had growing Mexican *colonias* between 1900 and 1940; in many instances, the consuls were active in the social and cultural life of the *colonias*.

This period, 1900-1940, further marks the pivotal generation of Mexican immigrant women. Migration before that time was mostly male, generally for employment on the railroads or in the mines. This period, however, witnessed some of the first sizable migrations of Mexican females to the American Southwest and to other areas; many contemporary Chicanas can point to the migration of their mothers or grandmothers from Mexico to the United States during that period.

This is not to say that there are not problems with the data. It can be argued with reason that middle- and upper-class women would be more likely to register with the consuls and maintain some kind of relationship with them. Moreover, there was probably a large gap between what appeared in the various *informes* of the consuls and what really happened. Many problems, events, and concerns may never have been given their proper place in the consul's paperwork. But the fact remains that a tremendous amount of information did make it into the consul's reports and survives in the archives of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

## Conclusion

Although this presentation refers only to archives and documents located in Mexico City, the Mexican border states also contain sources of primary historical documentation pertinent to the Chicana experience. Each state capital has an official state archive, housing its documents and papers, and other information as well. Moreover, the *municipios* along the border also have archives with potentially valuable files.

Primary historical material located in Mexico will be of use to most researchers with an interest in Chicanas, whether novices or seasoned veterans, whether social scientists or humanists. However, this kind of research is taxing and time-consuming, for at this point we are only beginning to discern the potential for understanding the Chicana that exists in Mexican historical archives. Moreover, presently available inventories for record groups do not necessarily take either Chicanos or Chicanas into consideration. Notwithstanding the obstacles, researchers of any discipline studying the Chicana who want to include a historical dimension in their work

must seriously think about doing some work in Mexican archives to complement their findings.

In sum, then, sources of primary historical information in Mexico should not be overlooked for their possible relevance to the Chicana experience. They represent a very valuable source of data from a different perspective about the experience of Mexican women in the United States.

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