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CHAPTER 3: The Mexican Far North

This chapter introduces Mexico in 1821 through 1848 as the nation gained its independence from Spain, as well as the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. During this period, Mexico—along with many other Latin American countries—faced many difficulties following the collapse of the Spanish Empire, and was unable to dedicate sufficient attention to its northern border regions. Like Spain, the primary problem Mexico faced was its inability to populate a vast area over which it never established effective control. The introduction of the United States, a nation with seemingly unlimited resources and an expanding population full of confidence that bordered on arrogance, could mean only trouble for their southern neighbors. Mexico needed a long period of peace, but it was its misfortune to find it urgently in the early years of its existence as a sovereign nation.

Like the first two chapters, I appreciated how issues within each community are explained, such as racial hierarchies and positions of power in New Spain. Likewise, Mexican independence is explained in the context of each state—California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas—and I enjoyed how the events portrayed also introduce each states values, which still appear to be prevalent today. Like the previous chapters, I found the author to avoid major biases by focusing on the atrocities committed by white settlers and how they often rejected any possibility of assimilating into indigenous cultures, instead opposing their own views and not accepting “no” for an answer.

What stood out to me most was the section focused on California, and how it had little political involvement in the events leading up to Mexico’s independence. General Antonio Lopez, in my mind, was a prominent figure in establishing typical California values, as he was an advocate for federalism and liberalism. Ironically, this passage also included conflict between geographical lines, especially with northerners and southerners, which can be still be seen, although for different reasons.

Prior to reading this chapter, I knew the basics of California’s history, especially that of the missions and the economic boom due to agricultural ventures, such as ranches. Growing up in Santa Clara, I had always been told stories of the mission at San Juan Bautista, and after moving to Monterey, I’m surrounded by the farms of the Salinas valley. Additionally, along with learning Northern American history, I had already read about the start of fur trading via French immigrants.

Reading this chapter, I learned more about power structures in each state, and grew to understand how many racist stereotypes came to be due to biased historical events. Ironically, Anglos in Texas were the original “illegal aliens” of their time, and despite measures of the Mexican government to require immigrant families to learn Spanish, the exact opposite now happens throughout the country; despite not having an official language, many nationalistic and/or xenophobic people in the United States want it to be a requirement for immigrants to learn English. That being said, such attitudes developed early, as Anglos and Mexicans were separated by religious, political, linguistic differences, and a majority of Anglo Texans were committed to slavery.

Compared to many American history books we come into contact with in our youth, Manual Gonzales continues to offer multiple perspectives when explaining the interactions between indigenous groups, mestizos, and white immigrants. One of the passages that stood out the most to me was regarding Polk and his efforts to manipulate Mexico into initiating the Mexican War in 1846, and despite the United States’ victory, ongoing issues with xenophobia still prevail. Polk’s instigating a war and blaming Mexicans was no different than what Bismarck and Cavour would do in Europe during the next few years or what the United States would do on the Persian Gulf in the early twenty-first century. The war forced Mexico to take action and defend itself, a series of manipulating acts that resulted in the loss and surrender of a large sum of land across the southwest, led to the demoralization of Mexico and damaged relations between the two countries, and for history to be manipulated in such a way that continues anti-Mexican sentiments in many conservative American communities is an atrocity.

Because of Gonzales’ willingness to share multiple perspectives on the same event, I believe that his interpretation is legitimate. There was so much in this chapter that I couldn’t remember learning in my early education, which proves how strongly the United States generally feels about sharing its history of oppressive practices, as well as admitting how such practices influenced long-term prejudice.

CHAPTER 4: The American Southwest

This particular chapter focused on anti-Mexican attitudes during the second half of the nineteenth century. These sentiments arose for many reasons; the most apparent was the bitter feelings left by the recent war, and although the fighting had not lasted very long, deep hostility created during the conflict persisted on both sides for many years. Dominated by their enemies, Mexicanos adopted an attitude that is perfectly understandable, like many responses to oppressive systems. Likewise, the response of the conquerors is more complicated, because although Americans were the conquerors, just like in other American wars, enemies (in this case, Mexico) are portrayed as evil and undeserving of respect. In addition to poor relations with Mexico, this chapter reflects on many negative interactions with minority groups in the United States, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

In my opinion, this chapter offered the most insight as to why many racial stereotypes still exist today, as well as how many oppressive systems come to be in the United States. No matter how much I continued to read, each situation generally involved Anglo people feeling so threatened and insecure that they made great strides to lessen the chances of achieving success by any non-white groups. After reading this particular chapter, I realized that regardless of which group negative actions are perpetuated against, the oppressor’s mindset stays the same, and the reactions of every oppressed group has been manipulated throughout time to paint that group as the aggressors instead as a means of maintaining prejudiced systems.

Something that really stood out to me in this chapter was how religious prejudice was an element of anti-Mexican sentiments. Heated anti-Catholicism had been distinguishing factor of English culture since the sixteenth century given the insignificant size of the Catholic population, and became a cultural phenomenon that was inherited by English-American immigrants. The surge of Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century, however, revived Anglo fears of popery. Such concerns were not alleviated in the least when in the midst of the Mexican War, as several hundred Irish Catholics abandoned the American army to support Mexico. I knew that there were anti-Irish actions in the United States, and that was due to religious stigma, but I had never suspected that aiding Mexico was another factor, ultimately leading both Irish and Mexican Catholics to be seen as lazy, irresponsible, and priest-ridden minorities, largely incapable of assimilation.

Prior to reading this chapter, I had learned a little about the poor treatment of minority groups in California, as the law was often used to further the disadvantages of minorities. For example, as California had many job opportunities based in mining, Mexican and Chinese exclusionary codes were developed so neither group would be allowed to dig. Additionally, in 1850, California’s Foreign Miners’ License Tax was enacted, which required non-American citizens to pay a tax of twenty dollars each month if they wished to be able to dig for American gold. However, that tax did not apply to white Europeans, only Hispanics and Asians were required to pay. With such a combination of laws against minority miners, it’s clear that discrimination had as much to do with race as a means of getting rid of any economic competition.

Because I don’t know much about the history of many southwest states, I was very interested to learn about Mariano Samaniego of New Mexico, whose goal was to protect the rights of fellow Mexicanos, especially when the growing strength of nativist sentiments began to alarm the Mexicano community. Linguistic barriers played a large role in oppressive systems between the United States and Mexico, but he organized the Spanish-speaking masses and encouraged them to participate in politics. Samaniego pursued a vigorous campaign to fight against negative Mexican stereotypes, as well as defended the right to retain their own culture by promoting traditional customs like Mexican patriotic holidays and fiestas. He also wanted to improve the worsening economic conditions in the Mexicano barrios by promoting the organization of mutual-aid associations. After reading so much regarding the oppressors, I found it refreshing to learn about beneficial inter-community actions and programs.

Like the previous chapter, I never doubted that Manual Gonzales carried any personal biases, as he refers to many Chicano historians in order to give readers a deeper understanding of the time period. This, in combination with the vast examples to various oppressed groups in the United States (not only Mexicans) offer great insight to a darker side of our nation’s history and how such events have continued to influence our lives, even if we don’t actively think about it in such a way.