PART II Making Identities

3 We're Just Smelter People

We're just smelter people . . . it's in our blood.
—ROGELIO CARLOS JR., former Smeltertown resident and retired ASARCO employee, to the *El Paso Times* on the closure of the smelter in 1999

Manuel Gonzales wore many uniforms in his lifetime. As the oldest son of thirteen children, it fell to him to help contribute to the family's income. So in 1942, just shy of his high school graduation, he left school, put on the standard uniform issued at the smelter, and began working as a machinist's helper.[1] The fact that he had been born and raised in the shadow of the smokestacks in a house on M Street down the hill from the smelter gates, not to mention the boom in production following the start of World War II, likely made the smelter a logical source of employment. Probably equally important in his decision was the fact that he was not the first member of the González clan to have worn ASARCO work gear.[2] In the early 1910s, his grandfather Macario González emigrated to El Paso from Aguascalientes, Mexico, and in 1918 began working as a laborer in the sample mill at the smelter; already in his fifties when he began his employment, he retired from ASARCO in 1928. Later that year, Macario's son (and Manuel's father) Marciano also secured a job in the sample mill. Marciano worked in a number of positions and departments during his time at ASARCO, mostly as a laborer, but also in stints as a motorman in the blast furnace, as a signalman, and, toward the end of his long career, as an attendant and janitor in the bathhouse. He retired on a company pension in 1961 after more than fifty years of service.[3] Like his grandfather and father before him, Manuel learned the skills required for his position and before long was promoted from helper to machinist. It was a hard job, but a skilled one that afforded good pay and steady work. In 1943, with the United States embroiled in war, he traded his greasy machinist's coveralls for army fatigues. By 1946, he was back in Smeltertown with his wife María Isabel and at his job at ASARCO.[4] Over the years, this work allowed him to save up enough money to purchase a house in the nearby Buena Vista neighborhood

My grandfather, Manuel Gonzales (left), and his father, Marciano González, ca. 1960s. Both men retired from the smelter after more than forty years of service each; they are but one example of many stories of multigenerational service at the smelter. Author's Personal Collection.

for him, his wife, and four children. At the end of each shift, he showered and changed at the company bathhouse, and carried home his oil-stained work uniform for María Isabel to wash. In the spring of 1985, after forty-one years of service, Manuel Gonzales also retired on a company pension.[5]

The other members of Manuel's immediate family also assumed the wardrobe of the laboring ranks in a community where the smelter loomed large.

Work was nothing new for his mother, Julia González. As a young woman, she was among the growing number of young Mexican women who engaged in the wage economy in one of El Paso's large laundries. She used to tell her children stories about her days in the union, when she had donned the white outfit of her occupation and marched in "parades"—perhaps the demonstrations associated with the strike waged by the city's laundresses in 1919, when ethnic Mexican women demanded living wages on a par with those of American workers.[6] Though her days earning a living outside the home were behind her, Julia was still very much a working woman. With a husband and several sons employed at the smelter, the whistles signaling the change of shift at the plant punctuated her life as well. Exchanging her laundress garb for an apron, she oversaw the running of the González household, ensuring that each of her sons and daughters contributed in some way to the family purse. In addition to the laborious tasks involved in maintaining her household, the smelter provided Julia the opportunity to make a little extra cash of her own. In her home kitchen, Doña Julia (as her patrons called her) cooked hot meals everyday for her family and extended the service, for a small fee, to a few workers who routinely stopped by the González house. Sometimes she prepared boxed meals that Marciano took to the guards at the plant and that her children gave to the teachers at their school, affording Doña Julia a supplemental source of income. The work she did to keep her home running was as vital to the family's survival as the work her husband performed at the smelter.

The experiences of the González family, both inside the smelter itself and in the wider community of which it was a part, illustrate how work became deeply ingrained in the lives of the Mexican residents of Smeltertown. This chapter explores the institution of work as one of several places where Esmeltianos articulated a sense of identity closely connected to the smelter and rooted in their location in a working-class border community. Influenced by prevailing racial attitudes and the racially constructed landscape of the border city, employers subscribed to stereotypes of Mexican workers as childlike, intellectually and socially inferior beings who were transient and ultimately replaceable. The continuous influx of workers pouring into the self-styled international industrial center in the early twentieth century and the relatively rapid turnover of Mexican laborers at the smelter certainly seemed to corroborate this view. But while many Mexicans worked intermittently or simply passed through the smelter as day laborers, others, like the Gonzálezes, stayed. ASARCO's attempts to cultivate a pliable and reliable workforce

through company housing, a vocational school, athletic leagues, and workers' clubs succeeded in making Mexican workers loyal company men, allowing Esmeltianos to craft a different narrative of their experiences. Their endurance of physically demanding working conditions and racist foremen and their acquisition of industrial skills allowed Esmeltianos to become smelter men, claiming a Mexican American masculine identity that gave them legitimacy and status in a border labor system that was set up to demean and exploit Mexican workers.[7]

The working identities constructed in the context of smelter jobs extended beyond the shop floor. The work at the smelter intruded in tangible ways into the lives of all Esmeltianos. While smelter work may have been men's work, it relied on the critical supportive roles that women and children played in the economic life of the community. The smelter not only helped to shape the immediate economic opportunities of the men, women, and children of Smeltertown, but it also was the means by which Esmeltianos planted strong roots on the American side of the border and defined their place in the border city. In fashioning an identity as a permanent class of workers with families, community ties, and a long, multigenerational history within the industry that kept the city and region churning, Esmeltianos challenged the company's stereotypes and wider view of Mexican labor as transient as well as the very border labor system that systematically placed Mexicans in the lowest rungs of the economic ladder.

Help Wanted: Cheap, Docile, and Mexican

By the start of the twentieth century, the city of commerce, manufacturing, and industry that El Paso boosters had envisioned was a reality. As promised, the city's large Mexican population and reputation as a labor depot provided the thousands of unskilled, manual workers that employers required. According to the 1920 manufacturing census, El Paso had more than 2.3 million feet of factory floor space and over six thousand men and women worked in one of the city's two hundred manufacturing firms. Of these workers, more than 70 percent were Mexican.[8] By the 1930 census, the city counted more than thirty thousand gainfully employed men and women, more than half of whom were of Mexican origin, largely clustered in occupations in manufacturing and industry, transportation (including railroad work), and domestic and personal services.[9] It appeared that manufacturers and boosters had tapped into a gold mine when it came to locating a steady pool of working hands.

Throughout the Southwest, pervasive and deeply held racial stereotypes about Mexican workers reinforced and justified their exploitation as a largely unskilled labor force. Mexicans, many employers believed, were biologically predetermined and intellectually suited to be common laborers. In a 1908 report for the Department of Commerce and Labor, Victor S. Clark described the majority of Mexican immigrants entering the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century—many of them displaced agricultural peon laborers—as "Indians in physique, temperament, character and mentality."[10] In addition to their perceived lack of intelligence, Mexican workers were believed to be physiologically built for the kinds of arduous labor available in the railroads, mines, smelters, factories, and fields of the Southwest. Arguing in favor of the extension of exemptions for Mexican agricultural workers in 1920, for example, one Texas farm owner contended that not only was the Mexican laborer a "hot-weather plant" who worked better in the Texas summer heat given his "tropical" origins, but he was also "specially fitted for the burdensome task of bending his back to pick cotton and the burdensome task of grubbing the fields." What Mexicans reputedly lacked in physical strength they more than made up for with "nimble fingers" and the ability to complete repetitive tasks in agricultural and factory work.[11] Similarly, in his comments about El Paso's "most attractive" labor supply, Frank H. Knapp, manager of the Industrial and Manufacturers' Department of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce, asserted: "For mechanical operations he is usually superior to an American, for he will be content to remain on one operation and will attain great dexterity."[12] By choosing to view Mexicans as naturally adapted to unpleasant work, employers managed to create a pool of the perfect laborers to suit their needs.

Employers further characterized Mexicans as docile and lacking in ambition, traits that perpetuated the notion that they were controllable and exploitable on the job, and that called into question their masculine right to higher wages and better working conditions. "The Mexican laborer is unambitious, listless, physically weak, irregular and indolent," Clark wrote. "On the other hand, he is docile, patient, usually orderly in camp, fairly intelligent under competent supervision, obedient and cheap." While hardly a ringing endorsement, these qualities especially appealed to businesses looking to keep their labor costs down and to minimize labor conflicts. "If he were active and ambitious," reasoned Clark, "he would be less tractable and would cost more."[13] The fact that Mexicans, like those employed in section gangs on American railroads, were willing to live in adobe houses or ramshackle cabins with few

amenities marked them as not only intellectually inferior but also wanting as family men. Employers believed that, unlike the American worker versed in the virtues of hard work and frugality, Mexicans (native and immigrant born) quickly spent their wages on gambling, drinking, and fancy clothes. Still, Mexicans knew their place in the racial hierarchy: the "Mexican does not put himself forward, or seek white society. He observes his own canons of reserve and dignity, which are never offensive."[14] Employers throughout the Southwest believed that it was their inherent lack of ambition and understanding of their proper place that made Mexicans willing to take whatever work was given to them for low wages and few complaints.

Labeling them as passive, agreeable, obedient, and docile was a rhetorical device that allowed employers and legislators to make Mexicans seem less threatening, childlike, and racially other in a world where a combination of race, class, and masculinity defined everything from skill level to pay scale. Such attitudes worked to place Mexicans squarely within the West's emergent racial and ethnic labor hierarchy that pitted one group against another and where those able to prove their whiteness could lay claim to manliness and job mobility. A Mexican worker's skill level or experience factored less than his heritage. Although a small number managed to secure positions as section bosses on the railroads, the vast majority of Mexicans, due to their "natural capabilities," found themselves trapped in the ranks of common laborers in track maintenance, construction, yard gangs, and extra gangs working under the supervision of "American or European foremen" who were racially better fit for these jobs. Employers cultivated competition between workers of different ethnic backgrounds through their open comparison of workers' ethnic characteristics and through company strike-breaking efforts. Needless to say, native workers expressed hostility toward Mexican workers, challenging their masculinity for their willingness to cross picket lines and for accepting depressed wages that undercut the efforts of so-called honest, hardworking American men. In either case, Mexicans were deemed to lack the traits necessary to be recognized as individual workingmen and thus constituted the nameless mass of pliable workers needed to ensure a successful bottom line.

In employers' eyes, perhaps the most appealing—if also at times the most frustrating—feature of Mexican workers entering the transborder labor force was their supposed transience. Employers sometimes complained about Mexicans' less-than-regular work habits and propensity for quitting or simply not showing up. Mexicans drifted from railroad work to agricultural work depending on the availability of seasonal employment, and in some cases

left their contracts to pursue better-paying jobs in other industries, including mining. For workers, quitting represented a way to assume control over their working bodies and their earning potential. Refusing to put up with racist bosses, miserable conditions, and lousy wages, they responded with their feet by walking away. Despite this, some railroad managers preferred "roving Mexicans" to itinerant white men because "they will go on a job, if they agree to, and work, though they may not stay long."[15] Employers and legislators generalized that Mexican workers—many of them men who traveled the labor circuit without families—were birds of passage who would not only wander from job to job, but also would eventually return to Mexico. These arguments were undoubtedly structured to assuage the fears of nativists, reformers, and Euro-American residents of cities who worried about the growing presence of Mexicans in neighborhoods, schools, and public spaces. The image of Mexicans as temporary workers also helped justify their position in the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. If workers did not stay, employers and local and state agencies bore no obligation to them; more to the point, employers bet on the fact that there were always more workers to replace them.

Making Modern Workers: American Companies in Mexico

Much as government officials and employers liked to portray Mexican laborers as being completely ignorant of the ways of modern capitalism, in reality many Mexicans had already gained substantial experience in industrial work before they set foot across the border, thanks in large part to the influence of American-owned railroads and mining companies. Thus, although larger structural and cultural forces beyond their control limited the possibilities, Mexican workers chose to become a part of the transborder labor system based on their understanding of how that system operated and their place within it. Requiring large numbers of workers for their operations, American-owned railroad and mining companies in Mexico turned to native labor to fill their ranks. Though the labor was plentiful, it was not initially industry-ready. The process of converting a group accustomed to working the land into an efficient, proletarianized industrial workforce involved not just the acquisition of different skill sets, but the creation of different value systems, cultures, and relationships to work. This process was ever-evolving and, at times, highly contentious. In Mexico in the early years of the twentieth century, employers and middle-class reformers engaged in a calculated drive to transform transient peon agricultural laborers into their vision of respectable, morally

upright workers through a complex program of incentives and the inculcation of values both on the job and in the home.[16] Using both coercion through the local and state police and perks like high wages and bonuses, company-sponsored housing, health care facilities, and other benefits, employers attempted to craft a resident class of workers who turned to the company for their needs rather than their native communities once they had acquired the basic necessities. A strong undercurrent of paternalism ran through these measures, yet the companies' desire to create a manageable workforce was paramount. According to one observer, the American companies "undertook a great many things for the Mexican laborer which had never been done before, some of them on the grounds of public good and others simply as a matter of business, to secure the contentment and efficiency of the labor."[17] Using advertisements and labor recruiters known as *enganchadores*, and promising enticing benefits, companies recruited workers from the countryside and surrounding regions. Over time, Mexican laborers who initially migrated from the haciendas for seasonal work in the mines and smelters settled in small towns surrounding the mines or followed the better-paying jobs on the railroad.

The transformation of the Mexican workforce in U.S. firms occurred on multiple fronts. For the most part, American railroad and mining company officials, informed by racial thinking in the United States, continued to see their workers as lacking in intelligence, skill, and initiative. In most large enterprises, Americans occupied managerial and supervisory positions, with native Mexicans filling the remainder of the working ranks. American foremen still complained that Mexicans were slow and inefficient, but over time employers began to impart more favorable views. Despite initial conflicts between Mexican labor and American management over perceived apathy toward learning to operate and maintain heavy machinery, the U.S. wage system, and the number of vacation days taken, Mexican workers adapted to American methods. By some accounts, newly trained Mexicans were becoming more efficient workers and exhibiting a decidedly industrial work ethic. The positive effects of proletarianization showed. For example, Mexicans at the large smelter in Aguascalientes, who had clearly absorbed the lessons in industrial training, were "fairly sturdy and well fed, in marked contrast to the peons who came in to market from the neighboring 'haciendas.'"[18]

For their part, Mexican laborers gained valuable experience through their industrial jobs in Mexico, which shaped their understanding of their position in a transborder labor system. The need for a stable, trained workforce provided opportunities for Mexicans to enter skilled or semiskilled positions. Despite the initial lack of cooperation between Anglo workers and their Mexican trainees, skill transfer did take place and gradually native workers adapted to new techniques. Their new skill sets enabled them to earn more money and pursue greater opportunities in Mexico and beyond. For example, Mexicans at Mexican Central Railroad shops found positions as skilled machinists and helpers. Although they only earned between 2 and 5 pesos per day, in marked contrast to Anglo machinists who received a monthly salary of $125 paid in U.S. currency, this still compared quite favorably to the 50 centavos per day earned by unskilled laborers.[19] Even common laborers acquired industrial skills and work habits that would make them employable in railroad jobs, smelters, and mines in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, which provided occupational opportunities unavailable to poor farmers tied to the hacienda labor system. The demand for labor to build rail lines on the northern frontier brought thousands of Mexicans closer to the border, where, as Clark observed, "American employers, with a gold wage, have had little difficulty in attracting him across that not very formidable dividing line."[20] Mexican workers knew they could earn as much as twice what they were paid in Mexico, contributing to the "constant movement of labor northward inside of Mexico" and eventually across the border, where it "is ultimately absorbed by the still more exigent demand—as expressed in wage rates—of the border States and Territories of the United States."[21] Add to that the recruitment efforts of labor contractors operating in cities like El Paso, and the choice for Mexican workers was clear. Knowledge of available work familiar to them and better wages were enough to inspire Mexicans do whatever they could to secure the train passage to El Paso or to make the journey on foot.

Perhaps as important as employable skills and better wages, through their work in U.S.-owned companies in their homeland, Mexican workers gained an understanding of their relationship to capital and the employer. As William E. French's study of class formation in the mining districts of northern Mexico shows, corporate paternalism and employee benefits also shaped what workers came to expect from their employers. French argues that family-run firms and major corporate conglomerates like ASARCO "engaged in symbolic acts calculated to reaffirm the personal links" between employer and employee.[22] Company-sponsored stores, schools, and churches as well as bonuses represented the "proverbial carrot" to entice workers. For instance, ASARCO mining officials in Santa Barbara, Chihuahua, distributed beans and corn to help sustain laborers and their families during periods when revolu-

tionary fighting forced plant shutdowns.[23] In less desperate times, ASARCO's Mexican subsidiaries sponsored band concerts on Sunday afternoons, attracting young people from neighboring towns and mines.[24]

These acts of corporate welfare were obviously self-serving and did not change the ultimate power employers held over their labor force. Company gifts came with the price of acquiescence that not all workers were willing to pay; the bloody battles over wages and working conditions and the dominance of American capital in the copper mines of Cananea, Sonora, and southern Arizona in the early twentieth century serve as proof.[25] Yet even as Mexican workers demanded better working conditions and higher pay, there was an important transformation in terms of how Mexican workers viewed their relationship to their employers. Employers' actions were undoubtedly infused with paternalistic leanings and motivated by fears of worker unrest or desertion, but they also provided a tangible expression of the company's concern for their employees' welfare. Through attractive benefit packages, companies had formed a social compact with their workers. These workers understood that, in exchange, they had capital of their own—their loyalty, labor, and skills. In addition to their industrial skills, the Mexican workers who traveled north brought with them their understanding of this compact. These relationships and expectations likely had a major influence on how Mexican workers, particularly those making their way to the ASARCO smelter in El Paso, would interpret their role in the company that was the cornerstone of the city's economy for generations to come.

Mexican Workers in a Border City

Two decisive historical processes—the creation of a Mexican worker stereotype and the proletarianization of Mexican workers in U.S. firms in Mexico—collided in El Paso in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. El Paso's position on the border had a profound impact on the labor market, presenting challenges that workers in cities farther removed from the border simply did not have to confront. Mario García argues that the two-tiered labor system that emerged in El Paso in the early twentieth century divided Mexicans (native and foreign born) and Euro-Americans along lines of both race and citizenship. The combination of an economy that required large numbers of unskilled laborers while providing far fewer skilled and managerial positions, the city's prominence as a Mexican labor recruitment center on the border, and the long-standing stereotypes of Mexican laborers all worked together to create a labor structure where Mexicans remained locked in low-wage, blue-collar jobs. While some firms, including the railroad and the smelter, employed a small number of skilled Mexican craftsmen, in 1920 a mere 10 percent of Mexicans in El Paso held skilled positions. In a pattern that persisted well into the middle of the century, Euro-Americans comprised the majority of the city's professionals, managers, and skilled craftsmen, while Mexicans, regardless of nativity, were employed as laborers, service workers, and semi-skilled operatives.[26] Within a short period, certain jobs became known as "Mexican jobs"—to be performed solely by Mexican Americans and foreign-born Mexicans. So strong was this association that during the Great Depression, El Paso's elites were able to counter the unionization efforts of Mexican American domestic workers by either hiring Mexican women from across the border or structuring relief requirements in such a way that American-born Mexicans had no choice but to accept the miserable-paying jobs as maids.[27] In El Paso, Mexican work was so deeply entrenched that it was extremely difficult if not impossible to break out of it; the proximity to the border and immigrant labor reinforced the boundaries of Mexican work in more immediate ways than in places farther removed from the international boundary.

This type of racialized labor segmentation directly affected wages. Table 3 shows average daily pay for sixteen industrial occupations in El Paso during 1911 and 1919. Common laborers, who were almost exclusively Mexican, earned only one-half to one-quarter as much as predominantly Euro-American skilled craftsmen like carpenters, electricians, and bricklayers. The "Mexican wage" system in which Mexican workers consistently earned significantly lower pay than their non-Mexican counterparts was a common and well-documented practice throughout the region. According to a 1911 report of the Dillingham Commission,[28] a full 86 percent of Mexicans working on railroads in the West earned less than $1.25 per day. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of native and foreign-born workers of English, Greek, Irish, and Norwegian descent earned more than $1.50 per day. Smelter workers in Arizona were similarly divided, with Mexican workers making around $2.00 per day and non-Mexican workers more than $2.50.[29] On the one hand, these wages represented a marked improvement from those earned in Mexico—in some cases, as much as double the pay rate—and for many Mexicans the opportunity to make comparatively better pay was enough to keep them working in the lowest-paying jobs under the worst conditions. However, the fact that skill level and experience had few material advantages must have been an extremely difficult pill to swallow. "They will never pay a Mexican what

TABLE 3. Scale of Daily Wages for Selected Positions in the City of El Paso, 1911 and 1919

Occupation	Daily Wage	
	1911	1919
Bricklayer	$5.00–6.00	$9.00
Bricklayer, helper		2.50
Bricklayer, foreman		10.00
Carpenter	3.50–4.00	8.00
Carpenter, helper		3.50
Carpenter, foreman		9.00
Electrician	3.50–4.00	9.00
Electrician, helper		4.50
Electrician, foreman		10.00
Labor, common	1.25–1.50	2.00
Labor, foreman		4.50
Mason	5.00–6.00	5.50
Mason, foreman		6.50
Steam fitter	6.00	9.00
Steam fitter, helper		4.50
Steam fitter, foreman		10.00

Source: El Paso Chamber of Commerce, *Greater El Paso*, 1, no. 4, 85, El Paso Public Library, Border Heritage Center, El Paso; Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880–1920*, table 5.3, "Daily Wages Paid for Skilled and Unskilled Labor in El Paso, 1911," 90.

he is really worth compared with a white man," one particularly aware Euro-American mechanic explained. "I know a Mexican that's the best blacksmith I ever knew. He has made some of the best tools I ever used. But they pay him $1.50 a day as a helper, working under an American blacksmith who gets $7 a day."[30] As this mechanic pointedly illustrates, seemingly objective measures of skill were in actuality highly subjective and were intimately intertwined with notions of race, manhood, and citizenship.

The wage differential was especially problematic in El Paso because of the competition from newly arrived Mexicans or those who resided in neighboring Ciudad Juárez. The fact that employers could tap into this deep pool of Mexican immigrant labor allowed them to pay consistently lower wages across the board, regardless of workers' background. The *Labor Advocate*, the

newspaper for El Paso's American Federation of Labor–organized Central Labor Union, reported that union workers in El Paso received as little as half of what unskilled laborers earned in any city in the region because of its location on the border. Furthermore, a 1919 investigation of women's wages and working conditions in Texas uncovered the widespread practice of not only paying El Paso's Mexican laundry and factory workers less than American workers in the state, but also giving Mexican women in the border city less compensation than women performing the *same* work in cities without competition from across the border.[31]

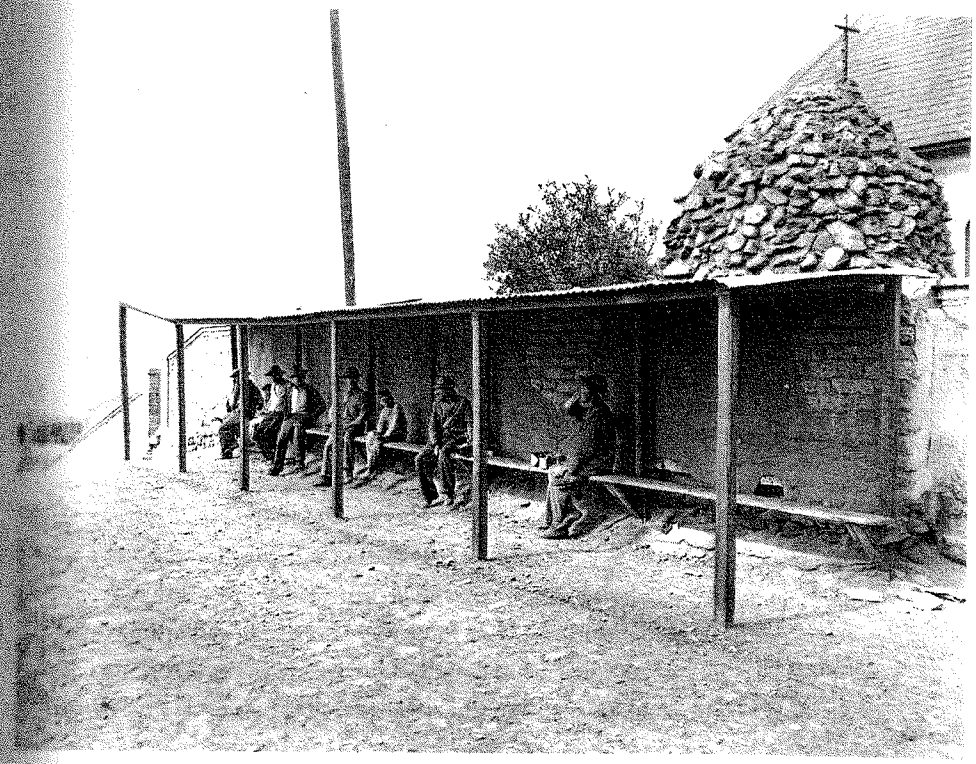
Members of the Central Labor Union repeatedly railed against Mexican immigrant workers and the Mexican wage that depressed earnings for all workers. Maintaining a policy of organizing by craft and limiting membership to U.S. citizens, El Paso's unions positioned themselves against the "horde of pauper labor" that took jobs and decent wages from hard-working American men. In various campaigns in the 1910s, these unions, which included a small percentage of skilled Mexican American craftsmen and women workers, drew a deep dividing line along citizenship, hurling the loaded epithet of "cheap labor" at Mexican workers whom they blamed for the miserable state of affairs. As an example of the divisive rhetoric, during a streetcar conductor strike in 1914 the *Labor Advocate* wrote: "Then turn around in your seat or across the aisle and take a look at some ugly visaged, peon Mexican labor from the smelter or the cement plant. Compare [him to the Euro-American streetcar conductor]. There is the American motorman or conductor, true Americans, yet paid a slave's wage. Those Mexicans who can neither read, write the English language and can hardly think, are paid as much as are these men upon whom the company places a burden of responsibility greater than their wages."[32] Although it is highly unlikely that a Euro-American streetcar driver could really have made as little as a Mexican smelter or cement plant laborer, the union's position was painfully clear. White streetcar conductors were "true Americans" and high wages were their manly birthright. By contrast, the "ugly visaged," illiterate Mexican laborers at the smelter and cement plant had stolen that ability to earn a manly wage from American workers. The diatribe against Mexicans that accentuated their foreignness was predicated along citizenship lines, but racial ones as well. Unfortunately, despite the Central Labor Union's official policy of organizing Mexican American skilled workers, on a practical level few El Pasoans bothered to distinguish between U.S.- and foreign-born Mexicans, many of whom were also employed at the ASARCO smelter and Southwestern Portland Cement. This hostility

toward Mexican labor, which would remain a mainstay of El Paso labor politics, ultimately weakened the position of all laborers in the border economy. It helps to explain why many Mexican Americans would choose to distance themselves from immigrant workers in order to survive and secure their own position in the labor hierarchy.

Inside the Gates: Mexican Workers in the El Paso Smelter

As the nineteenth century came to a close, the ASARCO-owned smelter located just beyond the city limits emerged as one of El Paso's largest firms, profiting from and participating in a border labor system dependent on Mexican labor. Based on the size of its physical structures, workforce, and payrolls, the smelter was, quite literally, the biggest show in town. As a result of its massive operations, the smelter attracted thousands of workers to El Paso and to Smeltertown. In the minds of residents, employers, and potential workers throughout the border city, the connection between the smelter and the community that bore its name was clear: If you wanted work, you needed to get to Smeltertown. In addition to the hundreds of families who settled into company-owned homes and self-constructed houses built on rented property in the neighboring community, workers from across the city made their way via streetcar to the end of the line in Smeltertown. Once there, they waited outside the company's gates hoping to be selected for a day's work or for a job that might turn into something more. In the smelter's early years it was a common practice for foremen to fill a vacant position by telling another worker to go call on a friend or family member, or for them to go out to the company's gates to get extra day labor. Sabina Alva recalled that other men left their names at an ASARCO office building that had once been a restaurant and later a store, where foremen sent someone to call workers if they were needed.[33] Years later, Rogelio Carlos Jr. had vivid memories of workers sitting in an open area outside the smelter waiting to be hired. "They would come on the bus, and they'd get off right there on the highway, in front of Porritas' [a Smeltertown neighborhood bar] and the smelter," he said. "[Back then] the supervisor had the power to go up there and go 'You, you, you, you and you, I need you inside.'"[34] It was a convenient arrangement all around. The company relied on a large supply of laborers to maintain its level of output, and people living and arriving daily in Smeltertown depended on the plant as a steady source of jobs. Both workers and jobs could be found in Smeltertown.

The abundance of Mexican labor was vital to the smelter's growth and ultimate success. The El Paso smelter was the only large-scale operation of its kind in the Southwest to rely so extensively on a large Mexican workforce. In 1914, one industry journal noted that following a fire in 1900, the El Paso smelter had been rebuilt for the express purpose of making use of Mexican hand labor.[35] The plant was unique among large custom smelters for its craneless converter department, opting instead to use separate locomotives with crews of workers to load copper matte into the large converters and haul away slag, matte, and bullion. Because of its large Mexican workforce to supply manual labor, the smelter avoided the initial capital investment to install expensive equipment. "In the craneless plant . . . there is a great saving in first cost," the *Engineering and Mining Journal* observed, "and where there is ample converter capacity and cheap labor, it might be accepted as a substitute for the usual equipment."[36] To this end, the smelter employed more Mexicans



Men outside the smelter gate, date unknown. In the early years, men seeking work waited outside the gates of the smelter. The covered benches also provided a place for workers to eat the lunches prepared by wives and delivered by sons. Photo courtesy of the ASARCO El Paso Plant Historical Photograph Collection.

TABLE 4. Ethnic Distribution of 10 Percent Sample of New Employees at ASARCO, by Decade, 1910–1950

	Mexican Employees	Anglo Employees
1910	21	5
1920	615	115
1930	67	71
1940	255	108
1950	91	38

Source: ASARCO Retired Employee Archives.

than any other industry in town. Jesús Gutiérrez began his tenure at ASARCO in the 1910s, at the height of its World War I boom. "Well, in those days, we were thousands of workers," he said—somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,200.[37] Rodolfo Candelaria remembered that even in the 1940s, when he started working at the smelter, the workforce was easily "99 percent [Mexican]. . . . [Maybe] not that much, but there were more Mexicans there [than Americans]."[38] The numbers support Candelaria's recollection. Table 4 places the smelter's ethnic distribution of new hires in perspective. An analysis of a 10 percent sample of daily wage workers shows that from 1915 to 1950, Mexicans constituted a clear majority of the smelter's new hires.[39] This trend was especially notable in the 1910s and 1920s, when Mexicans comprised 81 and 84 percent, respectively, of the laborers starting their employment at the plant. The only time new Euro-American employees outnumbered new Mexican workers was in the decade of the 1930s, but even then Mexicans made up almost half of new workers in the sample. In response to the economic slump brought on by the Depression, the smelter dramatically scaled back production (at times only operating every other month), cut down on the number of new hires, and undoubtedly laid off hundreds more. As the downturn in the economy continued unabated, the hostility created by the perception that Mexican workers were taking jobs from American workers took the form of layoffs and deportation drives in major cities across the Southwest. Although there is no hard evidence that ASARCO employees were actually deported, the antagonism toward Mexican smelter workers in El Paso was likely very evident.[40] By the start of World War II, numbers had rebounded, and once again Mexicans represented approximately 70 percent of new employees at the smelter.

The smelter's reputation for being one of the best-paying employers in town attracted hundreds of workers to its gates and to the nearby bustling community of Smeltertown. An industry observer wrote that the smelter's contract system, which paid according to the amount of ore a worker unloaded from the unending line of box cars and gondolas that entered the yard, proved to be a huge draw. This successful system contributed to the "constant waiting list of men to get on the unloading gangs" and represented "a good example of the intelligent application of efficiency engineering" on the part of smelter officials. This industry insider maintained that, in 1914, contractors working in the unloading yard earned as much as one and one-half to two times the day wage that unskilled workers in the city were making. This rate varied, depending on the grade of the ore and the distance it was moved; workers spreading the ore on beds earned a little extra.[41] A former employee, who started as a contractor in the unloading yard in the 1940s, stated: "[ASARCO paid] you so much money per car . . . of course, you were already guaranteed an hourly wage, but if . . . you could unload a car fast, well, you could make some good money."[42] From its inception, though, contracting work was Mexican work, and the better pay was relative to the dismally low wages paid across the border city. But the chance to make higher wages compared to other jobs in town and the opportunity to get a foot in the door to an even better-paying and more permanent job probably made up for the fact that it was hard physical work, designated as a "Mexican job." José Jiménez Sr. and José Hidalgo, who both joined ASARCO in the 1940s, began as contractors "*descargando carros*" (unloading ores from the railroad cars).[43] Once in, Jiménez applied for a position as a driver; he remembered being reassigned from one day to the next. Hidalgo remained a contractor in the unloading department for two months before moving to the blast furnace in the lead department. Because of its potential for paying better wages than other local firms, the smelter's contract department proved highly effective in attracting the large crews of inexpensive Mexican workers it so desperately required.

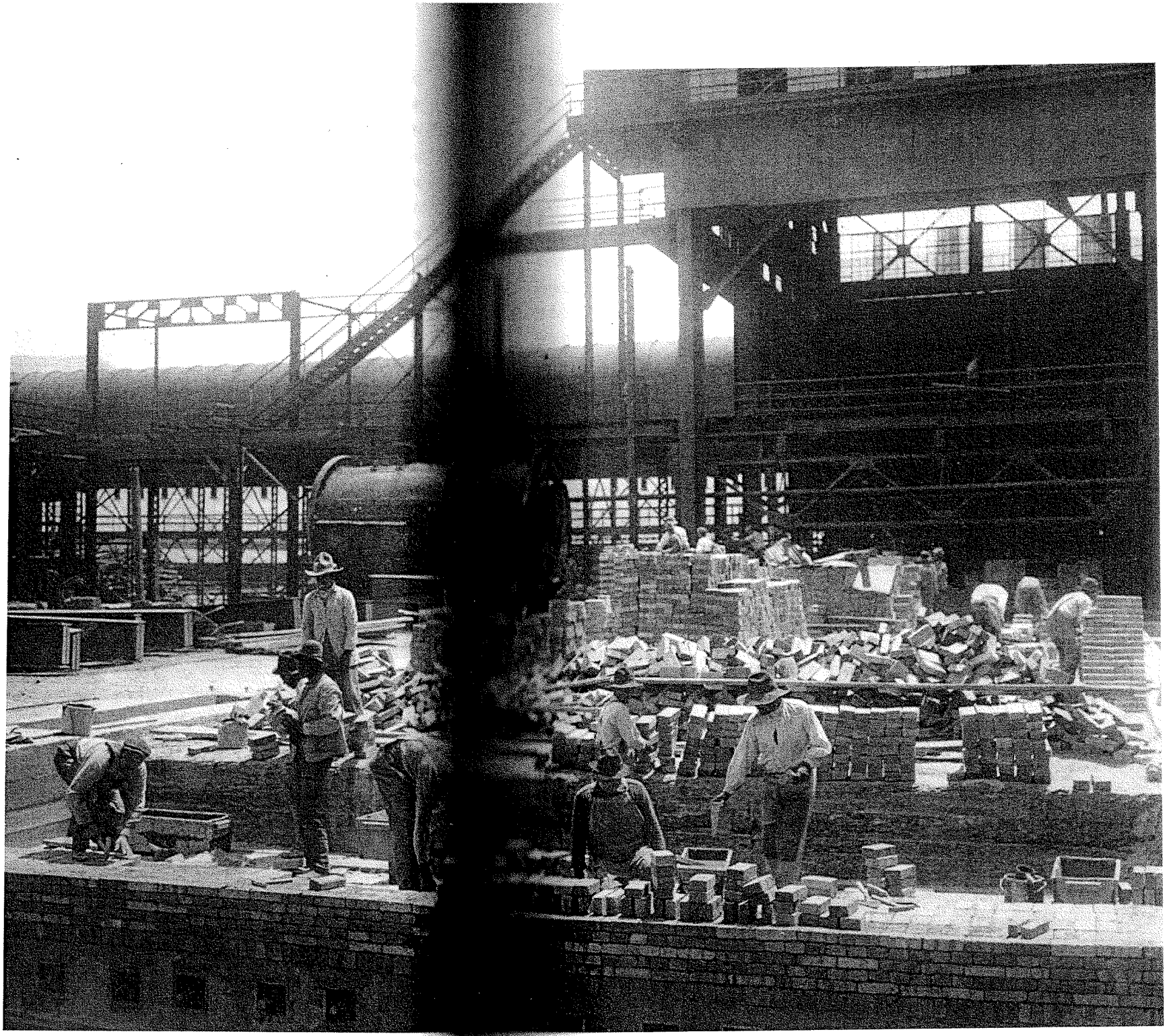
Such a massive operation must have been an impressive sight in those early years. On entering company grounds, the observer undoubtedly would have been met by hundreds of Mexican workers who performed the various tasks necessary to keep the smelter churning. Young men, more than half of them between the ages of 18 and 26, flocked to the smelter in hopes of finding work. A small number of older men, like Macario González, and an even smaller number of young boys hoped that ASARCO officials would overlook their age and give them a chance too. At least two 12-year-olds made

the cut, hired to be "scouts" in the yard in the 1910s and 1920s, as did Panfilo Dueñez's 15-year-old friend who carried water to the workers in the unloading yard so they would not lose any work time taking water breaks.[44] By 1914, the Mexican workers who made it onto the 1,000-man labor force were spread across occupations and departments throughout the plant.[45] From 1900 to 1929, 84 percent of Mexicans in the 10 percent sample were hired as common laborers, regardless of their skill level, previous experience, or education, while less than 10 percent of Euro-American workers entered as laborers. A former employee said that his father, who worked at ASARCO from 1897 until his retirement in 1931, spent his entire career as a laborer, performing menial, manual tasks like "carrying some material in wheelbarrows, some [dirt] and iron, stuff like that."[46] Almost 6 percent of new Mexican workers were hired as helpers for skilled—most often Euro-American—blacksmiths, machinists, carpenters, and other craftsmen, though in the years before the Depression even these semiskilled and lower-paying jobs were reserved for Euro-Americans. Smaller numbers of Mexicans entered the smelter in other, assorted occupations. As early as the 1920s, some Mexicans were employed as samplers (who checked the purity levels of the ores throughout the day), firemen (who fired up the furnaces), rail switchmen, bathhouse and tool room attendants, maintenance workers, and flue dusters and tappers. A small percentage of Mexicans worked as janitors or as office or hospital help. By the 1940s, Mexicans also became machine oilers or punchers, who had the arduous task of using a sledgehammer to maintain an opening in the air vents in the copper converters.[47]

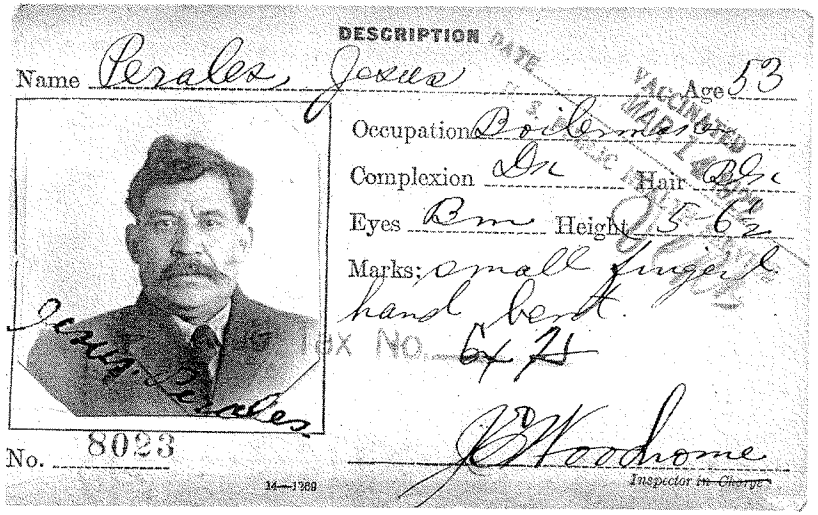
Department assignments drew the racial boundaries between Mexican workers and their Euro-American counterparts inside the smelter: generally speaking, the more skill required for the position, the less Mexican the department. Before the Depression, the largest concentrations of Mexican laborers were found in the blast furnace (22 percent), extra gang (typically workers who were assigned tasks as needed, 21 percent), brick plant (11 percent), and sample mill (10 percent). By contrast, Anglos were not as concentrated in any particular department, though the largest numbers of Anglos were assigned to the electrical shop (11 percent), blast furnace (8 percent), riggers (7 percent), and blacksmiths (6 percent). Mirroring the patterns common throughout the Southwest, skill level was directly linked to ideas about race, citizenship, and manhood. Well into the twentieth century, the brick plant and the contract department appear to have been almost exclusively Mexican, as no Anglo workers in the sample were assigned there in the pre-

Depression era. The brick department, which was responsible for making the bricks used to build the smelter's furnaces, required hundreds of laborers.[48] While some of the workers assigned to this particular task may in fact have had some experience or skill level pertinent to brick making (a separate masons department may have been somehow related to this area of the plant), the majority of workers were more likely drawn from a pool of general laborers. On the other hand, no Mexicans were assigned to the electrical shop, which most likely required larger numbers of skilled electricians. Similarly, Mexicans were not hired as crane operators, motormen, or mechanics, and it was not until an industrywide strike by Local 509 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW) in 1946 that Mexicans were permitted to bid for these positions.[49]

Although assignment to a lesser-skilled job in a "Mexican" department was more common, some Mexicans found entry to the plant as skilled tradesmen, indicating that even if some positions were restricted according to race, they were not always exclusively so. The immigrant identification card of my paternal great-grandfather, Jesús Perales, indicates that he was a boilermaker by occupation. A letter tucked inside his old wallet, typed on Consolidated Kansas City Smelting and Refining letterhead certifying his employment status, states that he was hired in July 1901 as a boilermaker in the mechanical department at the El Paso smelter and that he held that position until at least May 1924. Described as a "very faithful and steady employe [*sic*]" who was "sober and trustworthy," Perales seemed to be one of a few exceptions to the rule holding that Mexicans were more often than not inherently untrustworthy.[50] Andrés Ortíz also was a boilermaker and a general mechanic in the 1930s.[51] The 10 percent sample of all personnel records shows that ASARCO employed Mexicans in distinctly skilled positions very early in the plant's history. Before 1929, the company hired four carpenters, two blacksmiths, one machinist, and ten masons, all of whom were of Mexican origin.[52] A separate set of employee records for workers residing in Smeltertown shows a marked presence of skilled workers, including two carpenters, a blacksmith, a mason, an engineer (most likely a locomotive engineer), two operators, two samplers, and one straw boss—a supervisory position below the foreman.[53] Although an analysis of starting occupations in the data sets did not indicate that any Mexicans were hired as foremen or assistant foremen, a review of the names of department foremen entered onto the cards themselves revealed that Spanish-surnamed individuals worked as foremen in several departments as early as the 1910s and 1920s. At least four different Spanish surnames were



Mexican brick workers inside the smelter, ca. 1910s. Photo courtesy of the ASARCO El Paso Plant Historical Photograph Collection.


DESCRIPTION

Name Perales, Josue Age 53

Occupation Boilermaker

Complexion Dk Hair Blk

Eyes Brn Height 5-6½

Marks; small finger left hand bent.

Tax No. 64 74

No. 8023

Inspector in Charge

Jesús Perales's identification card listing his occupation as boilermaker. According to a letter from the company folded in the wallet with this card, he worked in that position at the smelter from July 1901 to at least May 1924. Perales Family Personal Collection.

among the foremen in the brick plant and two in the sample mill, as well as in other divisions.[54] It is not clear whether these Spanish-surnamed foremen were hired as foremen or were promoted or transferred into the position, or how long they performed their jobs. However, their presence is significant. Early in the plant's history, Mexicans established themselves as vital, skilled players in the smelter's operations; their labor in these skilled positions reveals the distinct, if circumscribed, opportunities for advancement for Mexicans in the smelter.

While wages at the smelter were among the most coveted in the border city, they were still low and pointed to the racialized employment structure that functioned inside the plant and across the country. The fact that ASARCO largely hired Mexicans for lesser-skilled jobs regardless of experience or training directly affected their rate of pay. Between 1900 and 1929, the average starting pay for all smelter workers for whom a daily wage was listed was $2.31. Approximately 83 percent of Mexican workers earned, on average, $2.03 a day. This stands in stark contrast to the Anglo starting pay during this period, which averaged $3.75 a day; only 21 percent of Anglos started at a wage below the plant average. Employees' words vividly convey the extent and effect of these wage differences. One former ASARCO employee recalled that his father, who was a common laborer at the smelter from 1897 to 1934, earned ten cents an hour for a 12-hour day.[55] Andrés Ortíz, who worked at ASARCO in the 1920s and 1930s, stated: "Well, there were some jobs, like I said, [that paid] up to 75 cents a day . . . $1.25, $1.50, $1.75. A worker who earned in those days, let's say, $2.00 a day, that was considered regular pay. Someone who had a salary of, for example, 18, 20, 22 dollars a week, that was excellent pay in those times . . . work was very tight, that was during the Depression."[56] Humberto Silex, a Nicaragua native and labor organizer who was instrumental in the establishment of the IUMMSW at ASARCO, said that workers in similar industries in Chicago in the 1920s made significantly more than El Paso workers: "When I arrived in El Paso, I noticed how the people here were working in a state of slavery, to put it in those terms, for a dollar a day, for a dollar fifty. The highest pay in that time when I arrived there was $1.90 for ten hours of work. . . . In Chicago, when I worked at a smelter I earned, at that time, 6, 7 dollars [for eight hours] a day, which was very good money at the time. But here [in El Paso], you see the difference."[57] Although wages increased in the 1930s and 1940s, due in large part to the effective organizing of Mexican workers, Mexicans continued to earn less initially than their Anglo counterparts. For the vast majority of Mexicans in the early years, working ten- and twelve-hour shifts seven days a week helped them to make ends meet for their families, but it was far from ideal. Laboring in a virtual "state of slavery," many took what they could get given the limited alternatives.

The nature of the work, the racialized labor structure, and the low pay, not to mention the city's labor recruitment center identity, all contributed to the high rate of movement and turnover at the smelter. Once employed, workers could expect to be frequently shifted from one department and position to another. Julio Hernández, who came to the El Paso plant in the 1940s after having spent eight years working for ASARCO's Avalos, Chihuahua, operation, said workers in Avalos were hired on a sixty-day basis, then reassigned according to the plant's needs, not necessarily the worker's capabilities or interests.[58] This policy was likely implemented at the El Paso plant as well; even into the 1960s, workers were rotated often, exposing them to a variety of jobs.[59] Of the workers hired between 1900 and 1960, nearly half had more than one occupation at the plant. On average, 3.4 different positions had been entered on their employee cards for this period; 20 percent of the employees held more than five different positions during their time at the smelter. This kind of movement may have been the result of the smelter's particular needs, but in industrial firms it was not uncommon to reassign workers frequently to prevent specialization and unionization. In addition, the company policy that

allowed smelter foremen to go out to the gates to call in workers as the need arose also allowed for the equally easy dismissal of those workers after their job was done. Almost a third of ASARCO workers left the smelter because they were laid off, fired, rejected, or paid out for their short-term labor. Another third left their starting occupation, apparently of their own accord. Fed up with the conditions, poor pay, and limited opportunities, or lured by brighter prospects elsewhere, these workers took control of their occupational destinies and moved on. As the numbers clearly indicate, the smelter was, for a significant percentage of Mexican workers, a stopping point or pass-through on the way to something better anywhere but on the border. These numbers seem to confirm the idea of a transient labor force in a city of constant movement. But what of the third who stayed? These workers crafted identities that explain their persistence, positioning them in opposition to the ones who simply passed through. They were different, they believed; they were smelter men. Who they were and how they saw themselves as participants in a border labor system was shaped by their experiences at the smelter.

Becoming Smelter Men

The process by which Mexican smelter workers became "smelter men" required confronting the firmly ingrained stereotypical qualities associated with Mexican labor in a border labor system (transience, docility, and, by extension, the lack of masculine character) and writing a new narrative of their experience that highlighted permanence, skill, and manly endurance of hardships. In the face of the transience experienced by a significant proportion of the workforce, one way that smelter workers challenged some of the more commonly held beliefs about life and work in a border city was in establishing permanent communities. While a large proportion of immigrants entering the United States in the early twentieth century were single and married men migrating as *solos* seeking better employment opportunities in order to send money home to their families, the formation of Smeltertown allowed many Mexican workers to simultaneously establish deep connections to the company and plant firm roots in the community ASARCO helped to create. Part company town and center of industry, part Mexican barrio composed of people with transborder ties, Smeltertown provided a permanent base where workers and their families could establish their homes in close proximity to their jobs. Of the sample of Mexicans hired by ASARCO between 1900 and 1930, the largest group (44 percent) resided in Smeltertown; census data from

1920 and 1930 show that the majority were married and lived in male-headed households, often with extended families including in-laws, brothers, sisters, or other kin. More than half of all smelter employees lived with a spouse, and more than 20 percent of single men lived with a relative.

Unlike other work available to Mexicans, much of it requiring mobility, employees at the smelter established households, and their jobs at ASARCO provided a sense of stability and permanence. In short, smelter men did not move from company to company and from town to town; they built homes, families, and settled lives. Even those workers not residing in Smeltertown had ties to El Paso. Many lived in or around the center of the city in one of several well-established barrios. Common perceptions and labor union complaints notwithstanding, a surprisingly low number of Mexicans crossed the border daily to work at the smelter: only about 11 percent of the employee sample crossed the bridge from Ciudad Juárez.[60] This fact presents a completely different perspective on labor in border industries and suggests something unique about the work at ASARCO. Certainly people commuted from all over the city to their jobs at the smelter, with a few making the journey across the bridge from Juárez. Some maybe even lied about their resident status. During times of labor strife, ASARCO, like many other employers, no doubt tapped into the Juárez workforce to counter the organizing efforts of Mexican American smelter workers. It appears from the numbers, however, that while ASARCO located its operations on the border to capitalize on the benefits of the transborder labor flow, it is quite likely that the workers themselves came to see ASARCO as a place that would allow them to settle in the area, rather than just pass through. Over time, fewer workers lived in Smeltertown for a variety of reasons. Smelter and road expansions in the postwar period eliminated company-owned housing and displaced others living along County Road; improved transportation in and around El Paso and greater opportunities to purchase homes in the rapidly growing city afforded smelter workers more options. From early in the century, settlement trends indicate a changing worldview for Mexican smelter workers. What these numbers suggest is that those who chose to move to El Paso, and more specifically to Smeltertown, saw their place in the smelter as more secure. Many may have chosen to move on, and some may have taken on migratory work during layoffs or strikes, but others took advantage of the opportunity to set down roots and hoped that it would pay off in the long run.

Workers also confronted the high rate of mobility within the plant. From one perspective, the practice of reassignment and layoffs contributed to the

transience of the smelter workforce. But for many longtime employees, the constant movement of workers within and across departments and positions afforded them the ability to learn the workings of the smelter from every angle, giving them a distinct edge in acquiring valuable skills and potentially better-paying jobs. In contrast to the sample of all employees, workers in the Smeltertown sample averaged five positions at the smelter, and 33 percent had more than ten occupations, suggesting that not only did they stay longer, but also that they gained exposure to more departments and positions, as well as on-the-job experience. Workers reconfigured the meaning of mobility in ways that highlighted the advantages it brought. While reassignments may have been intended to limit skill acquisition and discourage worker mobilization, they also positioned workers to see themselves as valuable assets to the company. Rodolfo Candelaria, who worked at ASARCO for twenty-three years, recalled that because they were moved around so frequently, Mexican workers were more flexible when it came to operating certain equipment and were skilled at a variety of tasks. "I was an all-around machinist," he explained. "To be a machinist in El Paso, you had to work in any machine they give you, not only one machine. That's why they'd [ASARCO] been having trouble. At the time there used to be some machinists from the East who said they were machinists . . . [they] were one-machine men, and that machine had to be adjusted by somebody else."[61] Candelaria's varied work experiences turned the company's tactics to his advantage. The policy of not allowing Mexicans to hold permanent, skilled positions enabled him to become an "all-around machinist," one who was more vital to the plant's operations than the Anglo machinist from back East, who, by virtue of his race and citizenship, simply entered the smelter as a skilled employee. In Candelaria's estimation, Mexican workers had a distinct leg up on the Anglo workers, making them an integral part of the smelter's workforce.

In addition, though many Mexican workers—immigrant and native born—had to take lower-skilled positions despite their experience and training in skilled trades, reassignments opened up opportunities for advancement and more security. Jesús Gutiérrez started working at ASARCO as a sweeper in the *sala de muestras* (ore sample room) in 1904 for 75 cents a day. He then moved to the smelter hospital, where he gained first aid certification and assisted in the pharmacy. Over the course of more than fifty years as an ASARCO employee, Gutiérrez experienced a great deal of mobility within the company. He worked as an *ayudante de herrero* (blacksmith's assistant), as a *garrotero* (laborer who carried crushed rock and ore to the ovens and helped

empty out the slag cauldrons), and ultimately as a machinist and foreman. "All of that work was in the [smelter], but it was in different departments," he explained. "I went about accommodating myself to earn more money, and by then I earned $2.50 up there, and it was [for] eight hours." In his mind, the movement was not about the company taking advantage of him as a worker or even a lack of skill or focus. Rather, it represented his hard work and desire to earn better wages, and his ability to "accommodate himself" in higher-paying positions with better hours.[62] Similarly, Panfilo Dueñez was hired out of the Smelter Vocational School in 1927 as a mechanic's helper. Dueñez eventually worked his way up to become a foreman at the smelter's power plant, a position that provided him the security and perks of a skilled job, including a small house near the power plant to sleep in while he was on call.[63] Another employee, who eventually secured a position as a machinist, recalled his difficulty in moving up the ranks despite the fact that he had attended the Smelter Vocational School and served as an airplane mechanic in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. As he remembered, "I was hired and I went to work in the unloading department. *Con la pala* [with the shovel] yeah, unloading cars . . . my hands were so tender . . . I didn't do any hard work in the service. Yeah, it was hard for me to adjust to that . . . I didn't stay long. They tried to put me in the machine shop but they couldn't, but I had to work my way up . . . well, you had to establish some kind of seniority."[64] Moving up in the plant was by no means easy, and the structural obstacles to job security were a well-established fact. Once obtained, however, seniority brought stability and a sense of prestige in a labor system that viewed Mexicans as expendable and replaceable.

Having one or more family members who also worked at ASARCO could facilitate an employee's advancement from an entry-level position and provide a greater sense of permanency within the smelter. The experience of Alberto Beard Jr. illustrates this point. Mining ran deep in Beard's family. His grandfather, a mining engineer from England, was among the wave of foreigners arriving in Mexico during the nineteenth century. When the revolutionary tide turned against foreign-owned companies, he brought his family to El Paso. Alberto's father, Alberto Sr., had worked at the smelter for a number of years running the slag cauldron. When Alberto Jr. returned from military service in the 1940s, he was hired on in the arsenic plant. He lasted there for about six months, then was moved briefly to the lead department. Beard noted that the foreman of that department had once worked with Beard's father at the neighboring El Paso Brick plant. This proved to be an ideal opportunity for

Beard: "So when he saw my last name, he said, 'How are you related to Alberto Beard?' I told him, 'Well, I'm his son.' [He said to me] 'And what are you doing out here in the lead department?' 'Well, this is where they put me.' 'Don't you know anything about mechanics?' 'Yes, I went to school and everything, I have a diploma.' . . . and in two weeks, no, even before two weeks passed, right away [I was reassigned]."[65] Beard became an assistant in the mechanical department, working under a Mexican American mechanic named Ramiro Escandón. Beard said that Escandón taught him well in what was "*trabajo pesado*" (hard work)—lifting and replacing heavy tires and repairing machinery. When Escandón retired on disability following a stroke, the foreman allowed Beard to take over Escandón's job. Beard eventually moved into a position as a machinist, where he stayed until he retired in 1982. For the Beards, mining and smelting had been the family business for generations, connecting them across space and time. These familial and generational ties gave them a stronger connection to the job and the company, allowing them to secure better jobs, and to claim permanence and longevity in a system known for its instability.

Mexican workers also asserted their status as smelter men through their ability to endure the grueling, dangerous, and sometimes deadly work in the smelter. American employers complained about Mexicans' lack of manly fortitude and physical strength at the same time that they praised their inherent docility and natural suitability to arduous labor conditions because it allowed them to make a workforce to fit their needs. But as one historian contends, the dangerous work in mines, and one might argue in the equally hazardous smelters, provided "new ways for achieving masculine status" not only through the potential for higher wages, but also because of the strength such jobs required.[66] In ASARCO's early years, the hours were long (ten- and twelve-hour shifts were common) and the smelter was not mechanized, requiring strenuous manual labor. Sabina Alva, whose father and husband worked there at the start of the twentieth century, said that "back then, almost all those poor souls worked by hand, or with their lungs . . . there wasn't anything like there is now, machinery or anything."[67] Alva's father helped to dump the molten slag—which she described as "pure fire, like blood!"—out of large cauldrons, a job that was both extremely strenuous and dangerous.[68] In his time at the smelter, Jesús Gutiérrez used no machinery as a blacksmith's helper. "There were no steam hammers—everything was done by hard, physical labor, everything was done by hand." Gutiérrez remembered hauling 200- to 300-pound loads of ore in wheelbarrows to be dumped into the furnaces.[69]

Although the converters operated electrically by the time Andrés Gómez was assigned there as a puncher in the 1940s, the work was still arduous. The puncher's job, Gómez explained, was to make sure that air continued to circulate by literally "punching" a hammer into the air vents to keep them from becoming clogged with molten copper. This was a physically demanding job throughout the year, but it was especially tough in the summer months. "In the winter it wasn't as bad, because it was cool outside . . . but in the summer, many of us almost became dehydrated, vomited."[70] In addition, although ASARCO provided safety gear, including goggles, masks, and gloves, the heat, fumes, and dust inside the smelter compounded the physically taxing nature of the work. Fires and accidents were an ever-present reminder of the dangers of industrial labor, underscoring the masculine strength smelter men had to possess. "Many men were killed there," Enriqueta Beard recalled. "Some were burned, others suffocated, the heavy loads fell on them. There were some terrible accidents at times."[71] Sabina Alva remembered one man, Pancho Sánchez, a coworker of her father, who was seriously burned while dumping slag.[72] Among other grizzly accidents, José Hidalgo said that a man he used to call "Flaco" was killed when forty tons of dirt and ore fell on him in the scale department. "Well, we got him out after about 15 or 20 minutes, but he was already dead, the poor guy."[73] Some workers died or were seriously injured in explosions. Surviving such conditions required physical strength and mental fortitude; endurance on the job distinguished Mexican workers as smelter men.

Preparedness, attention to detail, and the acquisition of skills necessary to prevent injuries were also badges that smelter men wore proudly. Rogelio Carlos Jr. pointed out that some departments and jobs were more dangerous than others. "You could burn yourself, or bang your finger, or break a hand, or chop [your] hand off . . . you know, if you were not paying attention to what you were doing, then it was dangerous."[74] Jesús Gutiérrez earned first aid certification during his one-year appointment in the ASARCO hospital, where he treated small injuries—mostly cut hands or hurt feet—but he saw no fatal accidents in his years at the smelter.[75] Mexican workers took pride in their safety records. A member of the safety department, José Hidalgo was paid to attend courses on how to treat job-related injuries. As a member of the safety crew, he encouraged his men to be particularly mindful in their work to avoid accidents and injuries. "I liked to go around to the guys [and tell them] 'Be careful, eh? There's no rush to do things. Just steady. Let's do things right, so we don't hurt ourselves in the first place.'"[76] The smelter

Members of the smelter safety committee, 1954. Smelter men took pride in their safety records and longevity at the plant. The men here were honored for their role in securing more than two million man-hours without an accident. Front row (*left to right*): Carlos Islas, Carlos Duarte, Pedro Vásquez; Second row: Panfilo Dueñez, F. W. Archibald, W. C. Cunningham, B. D. Roberts, Manuel Apraiz, Eduardo Rodríguez, T. J. Woodside. Photo courtesy of the *El Paso Times*.

further promoted safety by awarding individuals for their safety record and by monitoring each department's safety record. Rogelio Carlos Jr.'s father earned the company's Joseph Helms Award for safety, because the fifteen to twenty men he supervised had no injuries or lost time. In all, he and his team clocked nearly 400,000 man-hours without a single instance of lost time due to an accident.[77]

Dangerous and tough working conditions were not the only challenges to manhood that Mexican workers faced inside the smelter. The pervasive pattern of discrimination embedded in the plant's employment structure, as well as in the border city, placed real limits on their advancement. It also revealed how race, citizenship, and manliness became inextricably linked in the racial politics of smelter work. Prior to the 1940s, the smelter had segregated bathrooms, restrooms, and lunchrooms. Former union organizer Humberto Silex said the discrimination was "palpable" when he first started at the smelter, and there were specific restrictions on the kinds of jobs open to Mexican workers well into the 1930s. When Silex applied for the job of fireman—the person responsible for monitoring and maintaining temperatures in the furnaces—it was categorized as a higher-paying, skilled position. At the time, each furnace had a fireman, an assistant fireman, and a helper. Silex was hired as a helper, the lowest of the three, despite the fact that he possessed the necessary training and experience for the fireman position:

> Turns out that if an Anglo-Saxon entered, it didn't matter if he was a hillbilly from the mountains; instead of starting as a helper like I did, he came in as an assistant. The assistant earned a dollar more than the helper. The helper earned something like two or three cents more than the laborer, and the assistant, yes, earned a dollar more. And the fireman, well he earned a salary like an official. So the Hispanic could die there as a helper, but they never promoted him to assistant, so he could earn a dollar more. But an Anglo could come in as an assistant without knowing anything about the job and the helper had to teach him the assistant's job and watch out for him. But the Anglo, if there was a vacancy, in three, four months that he was on the job, was promoted to fireman.[78]

Silex's experience vividly demonstrates the racial hierarchy functioning within the smelter. His comments reveal how Latinos imagined their own manhood in the context of their work at the smelter. Not only does Silex imply that lesser-skilled, underqualified Anglos would have landed better jobs based on their background, but also he uses the derogatory slur "hillbilly" to accentuate his point. Latino workers' sense of manhood was grounded in the fact that they possessed skills, experience, and a long history with ASARCO. The company's arbitrary hiring policies challenged that notion, insisting instead that race alone determined skill, rank, and pay level. Being assigned as a helper to a lesser-skilled person solely on the basis of imagined racial difference was not only infuriating, but also insulting to the masculine smelter worker identity that Mexican employees had worked so hard to create.

Panfilo Dueñez encountered similar problems when he went to work for ASARCO after completing training as a mechanic at the Smelter Vocational School. Dueñez wanted to move ahead as a mechanic but discovered that despite his training, he could not obtain a higher position. On the advice

of his Vocational School instructor, he approached the plant supervisor and explained that, based on his education at the school, he wanted to work as a mechanic. He was told that there were no openings in that position, but he could take a lesser-skilled and lower-paying job. Dueñez insisted: "It was discrimination, it was discrimination . . . I said, 'No, I have spent a long time studying, and my mind is dedicated to mechanics' . . . no, well, [the supervisor] probably had company orders to do that."[79] Various other positions were closed to Mexican workers as well. Mexicans could not bid on jobs as crane operators, for example, and very few found entry as straw bosses or foremen. Jesús Gutiérrez stated plainly: "*Que barbaridad* [What a disgrace!] . . . it was really hard that they didn't give you a chance."[80] One former employee had bitter memories of his time at the smelter: "ASARCO was one of the best [paying jobs available], but then there was always that dust, and they treated the people like dirt. They wanted more and more work, and they'd tell the people if you don't like it, well, there's somebody out at the door waiting for a job. You were intimidated, you were intimidated."[81]

Perhaps the most contentious battles over race, class, citizenship, and manhood were waged during day-to-day interactions between Mexicans and Euro-Americans. While corporate officers and plant supervisors may have had the ultimate say in the overall management of smelter operations, interactions with foremen and coworkers more often defined workers' immediate experiences. The relationship between Euro-American foremen and their Mexican subordinates could be the most conflicted, as foremen attempted to assert their racial power and authority and to undermine these workers' masculinity. According to Gutiérrez, some foremen "*eran muy perros*" (were real dogs) and treated the Mexican workers, especially unskilled laborers, very harshly, but "they were in charge in those years." Although workers had to arrive fifteen minutes early to get their machines in order, Gutiérrez said they never received pay for that extra time, even if it was required. "Those fifteen minutes, they stole it from us, that time."[82] Rodolfo Candelaria recalled one heated exchange with a foreman who refused to call him by his name: "One day the foreman said 'Hey, you!' I didn't pay no attention, I didn't know who in the hell he was talking to. He came to me and says, 'Hey, you.' I said, 'Listen, my name ain't "Hey, you," my name is Candelaria. Understand? If you need me, you call me Candelaria, not 'Hey, you.' . . . Some other guys, they tried to do the same way, and I told them, 'Uh, uh. That's not my name.' And I told the other fellow[s] '*No se dejen* [Don't let them treat you that way].'"[83] As this episode indicates, the verbal exchange between Candelaria and his foreman was

about more than correcting rude behavior. By demanding that the foreman call him by his name, and telling other workers not to put up with this disrespect, Candelaria was claiming the regard he deserved both as a worker and as a man—he may have been this foreman's subordinate, but he was not beneath him racially or otherwise. Revealing how his own concept of masculinity was intertwined with notions of skill, Candelaria contended that the root of Euro-American hostility was that Mexicans performed better than their Euro-American coworkers and better than their supervisors expected or could even do themselves. "Some of those Mexican guys were darn good machinists, better than the Yankees there, damn good," he said. "They were jealous of [the Mexican workers] because they knew better."[84] Likewise, Candelaria's statement about his Anglo coworkers' jealousy takes a jab at the Anglo machinists' masculine skill. Whether or not this was the case, the fact remains that both groups had developed their own understanding of legitimacy in the smelter ranks in which manhood and race were key components.

Yet not all interactions with Euro-Americans were marked by confrontation. Although people recounted individual experiences with wage and job barriers and foremen who routinely showed disdain for Mexican workers, the fact that they simultaneously asserted that there was little or no discrimination in the plant suggests the active reworking of their narrative that placed them not as victims, but as smelter men who retained their dignity and status. The example of Rogelio Carlos Sr. offers special insight into how powerful this counternarrative can be. During his forty-four years at ASARCO, Carlos Sr. established a strong reputation as a hard worker and earned the respect of his coworkers, Euro-American and Mexican alike. His skill and expertise had won him promotions to better positions, including a salaried post, as well as recognition for his service and safety record. His son, Rogelio Carlos Jr., said that his father never really spoke of discrimination or conflicts with Anglos during his time at the smelter. On the contrary, he emphasized that Euro-American managerial staff recognized and respected his work. "He was well-liked by the Anglos," Carlos Jr. explained. "He got along with them pretty good. He never had any conflicts . . . he was well liked 'cause they were colorblind to you. There was supervisors there that . . . Anglo supervisors that barely knew how to write their names. And my father used to tell me that he used to help them do their paperwork. And I guess that's why they liked him . . . if they had a problem, they'd actually go to my father and he would help them out."[85]

Arguably, the son's account of his father's experience is filtered through

the lens of his own impressions. Carlos Jr. started working at the smelter in the second half of the twentieth century, when the power dynamics and racial politics had changed markedly. However, this story poignantly illustrates both the challenges Mexican smelter workers faced and how they reconstructed their memories of a painful past to highlight their positive roles at the smelter. The evidence suggests that smelter work was far from colorblind, given the systematic placement of Mexican workers in lesser-skilled positions regardless of their experience or training. On some level, being asked to help a supervisor with his paperwork must have been hard to accept. Carlos Sr.'s participation in union activities and strikes against the company for better opportunities and benefits indicates that even if he could foster harmonious relationships on the floor, he did not necessarily agree with the differential policies in place. In describing the positive interactions with foremen and supervisors, and making references to his qualifications in contrast to those of the Anglo supervisors who lacked even basic reading and writing skills, the Carlos men made a powerful assertion of their place in the smelter and challenged the dominant narrative ascribed to Mexican workers.

Not all Anglos exhibited racist views of Mexican workers. José Jiménez Sr. observed: "There were some guys who I don't think really liked Mexicans. But the higher-ranking foremen would reprimand them, they told them, 'No, you're not better than they are. Maybe it would be better if you left. . . . These people are working here, why do you bother them?' No, but they did not succeed. We kept working there." Mexican workers did not just keep working there. They transformed the workplace and challenged the racialized work order. José Hidalgo remembered that although he learned to speak English in order to communicate with the superintendent, manager, and foremen in his capacity as straw boss, Anglo workers, including the plant superintendent, also learned to speak Spanish out of necessity, revealing how the majority Mexican workforce pressed the managerial staff to adjust to the ethnic realities at the smelter. Hidalgo said, "I think at the time that I worked there, there were maybe two, three American guys that didn't speak Spanish, but we taught them real quick, eh?"[86] As another former ASARCO employee stated, "Oh yeah, you know . . . they'd [Anglos] separate themselves from the Mexicans. But after time went by, you know, we were making the same money as they were, and we were as better or worse off [than] they were, and so . . . they had to assimilate. They had to assimilate to us."[87] Despite the discrimination they encountered in many facets of their work experience, Mexican workers

asserted their place in the smelter—they were there to stay, and managers had to adjust.

Claiming status as smelter men did not just involve defining oneself against racist Euro-American foremen. Manhood, citizenship, and skill also divided Mexican smelter men from other Mexicans in the plant, both native and foreign born. Jesús Gutiérrez and Andrés Gómez said that sometimes the Mexican foremen and straw bosses were worse than Anglos, because these men worked them harder to win the favor of their supervisors. These "pushers" lacked the integrity that smelter men possessed not only because they did not always have the qualifications or experience for the position, but also because they sought to get ahead at the expense of other Mexican workers. Being a pusher did not bring better pay, Gutiérrez explained, but as the foremen's "pets," they got easier assignments and therefore did not work as hard as the "real" smelter men. Pedro Saucedo's experiences with Mexican American foremen at the Southern Pacific seemed to be very similar to the practices in play at the smelter. "Well, the Anglo always treated me better than the Mexican American. That's why I always preferred to work for an Anglo supervisor," he said. "They treated me better. The Anglo[s] stood by you in certain things, or they would back you up. The Mexican American[s] didn't stand up for you; they often just let you go see the boss by yourself and they were afraid to see the boss themselves."[88] The tension wrought by favoritism that set Mexican against Mexican did not go unnoticed. One former employee said: "Monsignor Costa [the parish priest in Smeltertown] . . . used to say, '*no hay peor cuña que del mismo palo*'—there is no worse wedge than that made out of the same wood."[89]

Union Men: Defining Manhood through Brotherhood

Union organizing and strikes effected tremendous change for Mexican workers at the smelter; they also served as an important front on which Mexicans fought to determine what it meant to be smelter men. Labor activity among Mexican mine and smelter workers in the Southwest had a long history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mexican workers in the region's mining districts engaged in both informal work stoppages (known as *strikitos*) and organized efforts at unionization, like the major strike in Clifton-Morenci, Arizona, in 1903.[90] Mexican smelter workers in El Paso made similar attempts. In 1907, 150 Mexican smelter workers walked out at the El Paso

plant demanding better pay. Six years later, in early 1913, they acted again, calling for an increase in wages, a decrease in working hours, and an end to unfair practices and treatment. Their ranks swelled to as many as 1,000 by the early spring. The men found some surprising support. Early on, they were joined by five Anglo union carpenters, and despite its contentious relationship with Mexican workers in the border city, the El Paso Central Labor Union endorsed the strike, even providing a small amount of financial assistance and tamping down its usual anti-Mexican rhetoric in the *Labor Advocate*. Nevertheless, the racialized border labor system proved insurmountable. As one historian explains, despite the initial signs of solidarity, more than 250 Anglo workers at ASARCO, likely unionized workers, continued to show up for work. The limited support from the Central Labor Union, the lack of organized representation, the company's use of violence and intimidation, and the hiring of scabs—among them, Mexican nationals displaced from railroad work—combined to defeat the strikers. Although it ultimately failed, the action represented a critical moment in border labor history and revealed that the Mexican workers were willing to risk their jobs and their lives to be respected as smelter men.[91]

Unionization of Mexican workers at the ASARCO smelter and other area industries gained strength in the 1930s and 1940s with the emergence of the progressive Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO espoused a more radical approach, one that organized workers according to industry, not just craft, and included women, minorities, and immigrants; making significant gains during the Depression, it brought thousands of workers into its fold. It was in this context that the CIO-affiliated International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers began to organize Mexican workers at the El Paso smelter. Though Euro-American craftsmen at the smelter had long been represented by an American Federation of Labor–affiliated crafts union, there was no organization that addressed the concerns of the masses of Mexican workers.[92] Smelter employee Humberto Silex and IUMMSW representative James Robinson initiated a campaign to organize Mexican American and Mexican workers at ASARCO, the Phelps Dodge–operated copper refinery across town, and the Southwestern Portland Cement Plant in Smeltertown. Collaboration across citizenship lines was instrumental to the union's success. Silex and Robinson not only tapped "natural leaders" from among the smelter's workforce, but also approached the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) in neighboring Ciudad Juárez for organizational help to reach the Mexican nationals employed at the smelter.[93] Organizers utilized a

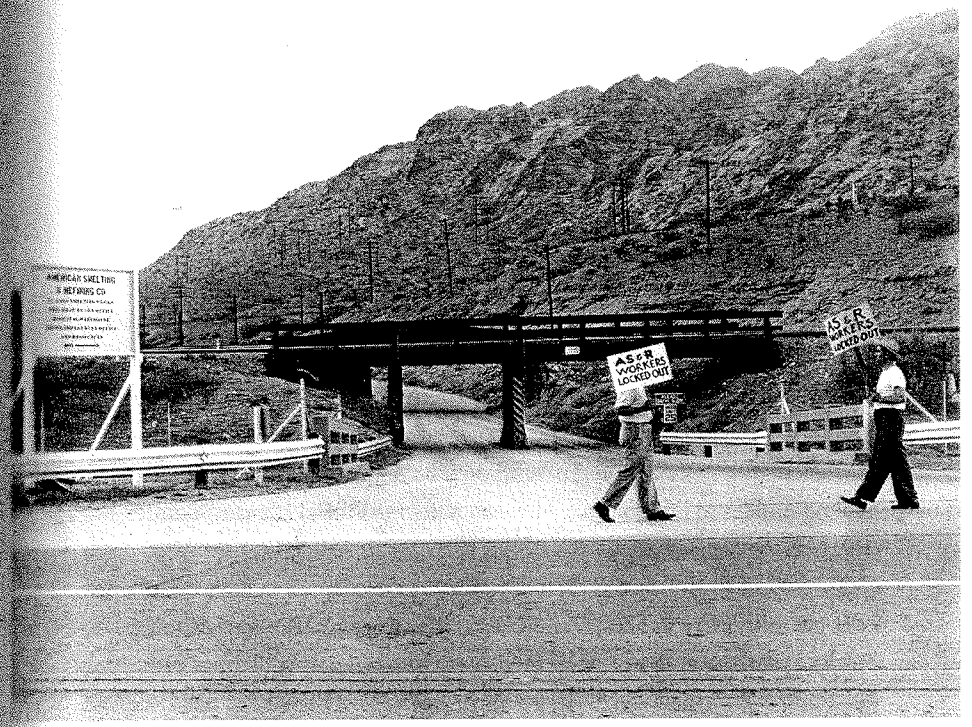
"border strategy" of reaching out to Mexican workers—in Spanish—in the workplace, holding meetings in Smeltertown to attract community support, as well as appealing to Mexicans living in Juárez to join the union and not accept positions as scabs, which would undermine union efforts.[94] These arguments certainly appealed to Andrés Gómez, a longtime smelter employee and union member who lived in Juárez until the 1960s. He faithfully joined when the union called for a strike, because "it is the only weapon that the worker has." Despite the actions of plant officials and El Paso County sheriff Chris P. Fox to intimidate union leaders and accuse them of communist activity, the organizing efforts were a success. "Years back, yes, I'd say about 99 percent were union," Rogelio Carlos Jr. stated. "They needed a union. The company just . . . I guess they treated you like slaves."[95]

While collaboration across the border was instrumental to the union's success, the practice of hiring foreign workers to replace Mexican workers pushing for change was a tried-and-true strategy for undermining union efforts in El Paso. The ongoing struggle to acquire rights and status as Americans in light of continued immigration from Mexico sometimes forced Mexican Americans to make the difficult choice to distance themselves from the foreign-born men with whom they worked in similar jobs and under similar conditions at the smelter.[96] In the same way that Euro-American strikers challenged the manliness of Mexican workers, Mexican American smelter men implicitly challenged the masculinity of foreign workers who crossed picket lines or were generally willing to accept low-paying and menial jobs. During the 1946 nationwide walkout by the IUMMSW that included the Local 509 chapter at ASARCO, strikers initiated round-the-clock picket lines to prevent the plant from hiring strikebreakers. Knowing that ASARCO and Phelps Dodge would draw from the pool of laborers from across the border, strike committees secured the promise of the CTM that it would not allow Mexicans to break the strike.[97] This show of solidarity could also be seen as a display of masculinity and honor. A scab crossing the picket line possessed neither. One particularly honest former union member recalled: "Even at ASARCO, all the menial jobs were supposed to go to Mexicans, you know . . . and when we wouldn't accept it, they didn't like it at all. So when they . . . had 'trouble' with us, then they started hiring . . . wetbacks. The bigger the hat, the sooner they'd get hired . . . they had too much trouble with the citizens." Using derogatory terms like "wetbacks" and making reference to the fact that they were preferred to the trouble-making "citizens," this worker made a clear distinction between Mexican nationals and Mexican

American citizens, using language similar to that used by turn-of-the-century employers and unions.[98] While hardly politically correct, these sentiments point to the powerful appeal of citizenship as a marker of status in a border labor system.

Building on the foundation laid by workers in the 1930s, the strikes of the IUMMSW in the 1940s brought about many positive material changes for Mexican workers. In June 1945, the union signed its first contract with ASARCO establishing the IUMMSW as the bargaining agent for the workers, a forty-hour workweek, time and a half for overtime, a wage increase of 11¼ cents per hour, a one-week paid vacation, and discontinuance of the company store and segregated facilities.[99] The strike remained a powerful tool for the workers. The following year the smelter workers went on an industrywide, three-month strike calling for improved wages and benefits, effectively halting plant operations. Thereafter, Mexicans were able to bid on positions as crane operators, machinists, motormen, and foremen. If ASARCO had stood out as one of the best employers in town before these tangible gains, the new pay increases and greater occupational opportunities only made smelter work all the more attractive. Advertisements for ASARCO touting a starting pay of $0.75 an hour (approximately $6.00 for an eight-hour day) prompted José Jiménez Sr. to leave his job at a local construction firm for the smelter. Similarly, Rodolfo Candelaria earned about $1.00 an hour when he started as a machinist at the smelter in the mid-1940s, and Julio Hernández made $1.90 per hour when he transferred to the El Paso plant from Chihuahua in the late 1940s.[100] José Hidalgo said his starting pay in 1947 was $5.85 a day.[101] Furthermore, the increased wages and opportunities allowed union members to claim their place as the man of the house. Returning to work after months out on strike restored their manliness as family breadwinners, even as the very act of organizing affirmed their masculinity. As the chairman of the strike committee told the *El Paso Herald Post*, "That's the American way of fighting, when workers and company men can get together and talk things out." In addition, men returning to Phelps Dodge were excited to know that they would no longer have to be "staying home during the day and reading the funny papers" to their children, that they could return to the task of providing for their families the luxuries of allowances, fares for movies, and new "dresses and shoes" for their wives.[102]

The union battles waged in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the military service of Mexican American men in World War II, reshaped the ways in which workers viewed the relationship between citizenship and masculinity



Two strikers outside the smelter, July 14, 1949. A. Briones (*left*) and Luis A. Gonzales, members of Local 509, International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, picket outside the smelter's main entrance. The union became a powerful tool by which Mexican workers gained better opportunities and became proud smelter men. Photo courtesy of the *El Paso Times*.

in defining smelter manhood. The events of these decades also brought about important changes in how the Mexican population in the United States conceived of themselves and their place in the social, political, and economic life of the nation. Various scholars have shown how Depression-era repatriation exposed the precarious position ethnic Mexicans held in American society; the threat of deportation, regardless of their citizenship status, forced them to make critical choices about their national identity. Others point to World War II military service and national appeals to wartime unity as providing the impetus and language that Mexican Americans appropriated in order to demand their rights as citizens.[103] In the case of El Paso's Mexican smelter workers, a long relationship that dated back to prerevolutionary Mexico in which the company and workers had mutual responsibilities also contributed to their sense of belonging and informed their struggles for equality and

fairness on the job. Although this history mattered, many men also recalled World War II as a critical turning point for Mexicans at the smelter. While generations of experience certainly shaped labor activism, the war seemed to provide a different conceptual framework for understanding the legitimate right of smelter men to better pay and working conditions. Though Mexican American workers had already begun to distance themselves from their Mexican counterparts, the language of patriotism, freedom, and Americanism was a powerful tool for workers. Employing the ideals of rights and liberties earned as American veterans and union men, Mexican American workers laid claim to the rights that they (and their fathers and grandfathers before them) had been fighting to attain for generations.

Many described a marked difference in job opportunities after returning from military service. Rodolfo Candelaria, who was involved in the union movement at ASARCO, remembered how he helped to convince the smelter superintendent to let him train Mexican machinists after the war. Candelaria, who became known as "El Maestro," told the superintendent: "Well, these Mexican boys [have] served their country, they're entitled to have better jobs. Let's get going."[104] In addition to the visible change in the opportunities for Mexican workers at the smelter, there was also a subtle shift in attitudes. Panfilo Dueñez commented: "When I came back from the Army, well, we had more privileges. . . . And then we had new people who didn't have the same kinds of discrimination against the people here . . . yes, we experienced a lot of discrimination. But I don't know what happened, something I just don't understand . . . when I came back from the Army, I had been back at the smelter for about a week, and this man who was very . . . very anti-Mexican . . . he was very changed."[105] By the close of World War II, Mexican workers found better-paying, higher-skilled jobs at the smelter. Candelaria observed: "We got machinists, we got electricians, we got pipefitters, we have painters, we have carpenters; everything. At first the big jobs [were] for the Anglos. Now you go to the smelter and you find, let's see, I think there are only two Americans [Anglos]."[106] The experience of war and the strength of the union changed the conditions of many workers at the smelter, opening greater opportunities for Mexicans at ASARCO. Moreover, the fact that by the 1940s, 70 percent of the new Spanish surnamed employees were native-born Mexican Americans further reveals the changes taking place at the smelter.[107] For generations, Mexicans had asserted their place in the plant; having fought on the picket lines and the front lines, they claimed their rights as men and as citizens to higher-skilled, better-paying positions and transformed the workplace.

Company Men: Corporate Paternalism and Worker Loyalty

Despite their overwhelming participation in union drives and their direct challenges to the entrenched racial politics of the smelter, Mexican workers retained a strong sense of loyalty to ASARCO, reflecting the deeply nuanced relationship welfare capitalists had forged with their workers. As Lizabeth Cohen explains, American corporations responded to the violent labor struggles of the World War I era by enacting a series of measures geared toward securing workers' loyalty and productivity. Rather than using repressive and heavy-handed paternalistic approaches to labor management, which represented little more than "a padded glove over an iron fist," they opted for more enlightened measures including the reorganization of employer/worker relationships in the plants, wage incentives, welfare programs, and community-building activities. They hoped that by winning over employees through these positive measures, workers would cede their trust to the employer, not the union or the state.[108] While smelter workers in El Paso certainly benefited from the new, "enlightened corporation" approach, their arrangement with the smelter had much older roots. Workers who had migrated to El Paso through the transnational network of labor and capital created by ASARCO were already familiar with the ways in which the company rewarded employee loyalty through company housing, stores, schools, and employment packages. The relationship between ASARCO and its workers residing in Smeltertown was shaped by an understood mutuality, in which both parties received some benefit. Though an undercurrent of corporate paternalism ran through ASARCO's efforts to maintain a controllable, productive working community, Mexican workers not only recognized these benefits that made smelter work so appealing, but they also helped to reinforce their sense of belonging and status as smelter men.

ASARCO provided a number of perks to ensure loyalty within its ranks. In addition to monetary compensation, its workers received accidental death benefits and pensions, which, though not high by most standards, represented an effort to show the company's goodwill toward its workforce. And there were other incentives. Jesús Gutiérrez remembered that during the World War II labor shortages, the smelter provided meals between double shifts. "At the change of shift, the company would pay us and they would take us sandwiches at our jobs . . . and good sandwiches." Workers received a ten-dollar monthly bonus for their efforts. And when Pedro Saucedo's stepfather was killed in an accident at the smelter in 1935, his mother received eight thousand dollars in compensation from ASARCO.[109] Moreover, the company

attempted to help maintain the ethnic culture of its workers. For instance, in the early years of the plant, it paid for and built a bandstand on company property for the celebration of Mexican holidays such as *16 de Septiembre* and *Cinco de Mayo*.[110] If the smelter hoped to secure the workers' loyalty through such efforts, it succeeded. Despite the hardships he encountered, Gutiérrez said he never participated in strikes, due largely to the benefits the company provided: "I lived in a company house . . . I had four very good rooms . . . well, the company treated me very well in those days." This did not stop others from striking. Indeed, it was probably the sense of the company's responsibility to its workers as much as the desire for greater job opportunities that spurred them into action.

The smelter also sponsored community-building activities intended to bring workers into the ASARCO family. As early as the 1920s, it supported local baseball teams and leagues for its workers. The organization of athletic events served multiple functions for plant officials and workers alike. For the company, organized sports served to teach workers the virtues of wholesome activities that would build team spirit and camaraderie and improve morale on the job, while lessening the ties to ethnic or neighborhood teams and providing a healthy outlet for pent-up frustrations. In Smeltertown, sporting competitions had long been important community events, and company-sponsored teams reinforced, rather than undermined, these long-standing ties. When the smelter team competed against the cement plant, brick plant, or other area teams, the games drew workers, families, and friends. María Palacio remembered going to see her father, Marciano González, play at the field by the El Paso brick plant; families would take a picnic lunch and sit under the trees to enjoy the game.[111] By the 1950s, the machine shop organized a team that competed against teams from all over the city and Ciudad Juárez.[112] In addition, as historian José Alamillo has shown, these athletic teams provided precious leisure space where men could "reassert their racial and masculine identity" through physical competition on the field and through the expression of manly bravado, drinking and sometimes even fighting off the field. Moreover, these leisure spaces served as places where men honed the kind of leadership skills and formed social networks required for successful union organizing.[113] Whether organized by the company or the workers, baseball, softball, and other games reflected the ways in which both company and workers attempted to build a community tied to the smelter, but also extended beyond its walls.

One of ASARCO's most important resources in its attempt to create future company men was the Smelter Vocational School, which opened its doors in 1923. Vocational schools in this era functioned largely as agents of social control and Americanization; indeed, few opportunities for better positions immediately materialized for graduates of the Smelter Vocational School. For hundreds of Mexican students, the school offered the promise of access to higher-paying, skilled positions in the smelter and other area firms through vocational training and symbolized the potential for something better, influencing their willingness to trust the company. Given the school's function and popularity (it produced over three hundred graduates between 1923 and 1942), it is evident that Mexican workers considered the acquisition of vocational skills crucial to their future economic security.

Skilled workers passed this mindset down to their children by encouraging them to seek out training. Alberto Beard Jr. learned this lesson from his father, who not only worked at ASARCO, but was also an instructor at the Vocational School.[114] Melchor Santana Sr. said many people took advantage of the education offered by the school because it was free and not restricted to smelter employees and their children. "ASARCO paid for everything, and my father didn't even work for ASARCO. Everybody was welcome there."[115] Pedro Saucedo commended the school for providing essential training to its students. He believed that ASARCO helped many workers learn important skills that enabled them to get better-paying jobs.[116] According to Panfilo Dueñez, one of its first graduates, the Vocational School was a great opportunity because it offered training in a wide variety of areas and its students left with a "*carera*" (career). As Dueñez recalled, "When Mr. Carrasco came, and they gave him what was known as the Smelter Vocational School, we [Dueñez and his friend Lorenzo Perales] were in school over here at Courchesne [the county school]. I was in the fifth grade, Lorenzo, I think he was also in the fifth grade, well off we went . . . we went to learn a trade. Well, the instructor, he was a very good man, recognized us, and he told us, 'Look boys, you have very little education, and so . . . you're going to learn a trade, to use your hands so you can get a good job.'"[117]

Although the Vocational School was an example of the limited educational choices available to Mexicans and other people of color in the United States, its effects for Smeltertown's working community were more far-reaching. For Dueñez and many other residents, the Vocational School represented a chance not only to receive an education, but also to build a career directly linked to the industrial work at the smelter. Both sides seemed to benefit from the arrangement: the smelter gained a more skilled and self-replenishing work-

force by educating its neighboring Mexican community. Mexicans received important industrial training and the chance to acquire a higher-paying job. The school created and trained a class of skilled workers who used their education to claim a place in the history of the smelter.

Another way in which ASARCO fostered a sense of community was through the Twenty-Five Year Club. Established in 1950, the club had two purposes: to recognize workers who "have given long and faithful service" to the smelter for twenty-five years or more and to "[promote] social relationship among the members of the Club."[118] Each year on or near April 4 (ASARCO's anniversary), an annual meeting and banquet were held as the club's signature events linking the workers with the history of the company. The evening provided a time for past and present employees to socialize and enjoy a nice dinner together. Members were welcomed by the current plant manager, and the president (the active employee with the most seniority at the time) was named. In addition, a moment of silence was observed for members who had died in the past year, and new members were inducted into the club. This latter portion of the evening's events was the most important. By listing the names of deceased and new members, the club and the company recognized the individual contributions of workers and designated them part of the community of silver-year veterans. The large number of Mexican employees among the membership, furthermore, underscores not only their significant achievements but also their longevity at ASARCO. Of the thirty-five charter members living at the time of the twenty-fifth annual banquet in 1975, thirty-three were of Mexican heritage, including Marciano González and Rogelio Carlos Jr.'s grandfather, Gonzalo Carlos. By the time of the forty-seventh annual banquet, it was reported that forty-one of the forty-seven past presidents had been Mexican.[119] The image of four members of the Twenty-Five Year Club—all gentlemen in their eighties when photographed for the *ASARCO News*—provides a visual testimony of the experiences of thousands of Mexican workers. Mexicans were a vital part of the smelter and were proud company men. They gave years of service, endured discrimination and physically demanding labor, and carved out a prominent place for themselves in the history of ASARCO.

Many of the men profiled here witnessed a great degree of turnover during their time at the smelter, yet the fact that several retired with more than thirty years' service suggests the effectiveness of ASARCO's efforts to make a community of company men. According to employee records, of the sample of all employees hired between 1900 and 1960, slightly more than 4 percent

(or 61 employees) retired from the smelter. Jesús Gutiérrez was one of them. When interviewers from the University of Texas at El Paso's Institute of Oral History met with Gutiérrez on February 26–27, 1980, he had already been retired from ASARCO for more than thirty years. In describing his time with the company—more than fifty years in all—Gutiérrez painted a rich portrait of the Mexican experience at the smelter. As a child, he would take lunch to the gates at break time; as an employee, he worked hard, on some occasions sweeping out the sample room, on others carrying 200- and 300-pound loads of ore to the furnaces. He spoke of the discrimination he confronted and the changes he witnessed. As he reminisced, Gutiérrez commented that talking about his experiences was like working again. "*Me excito del corazon*" (My heart becomes excited), he said. This simple statement reveals the strong connections Mexican workers forged with the company, as well as the power of being able to rewrite one's story. Gutiérrez's narrative is not one of victimhood. Though reflecting discrimination and hard work under less-than-ideal conditions, his memories are framed in a way that allow him to be proud of his contributions, excited in his heart.

Above all, the long lists of ASARCO's multigenerational Mexican workers speak most powerfully to the company culture of which they were a part. Like the three generations of the González clan, numerous families claimed generations of men who labored at and retired from ASARCO. José Lerma, his father, and several of his brothers worked at ASARCO, and by his account they put in more than three hundred years of labor between them. In addition to establishing lengthy service to the smelter, successive generations found mobility. Rogelio Carlos Jr., who represented the third generation of his family to work at ASARCO, established a long career at the smelter, eventually becoming a supervisor and traveling to Chile to help with the company's operations there. The Carlos family witnessed the company's arc firsthand. Grandfather Gonzalo Carlos had been a part of ASARCO almost from its beginnings in Chihuahua; Carlos Jr. was there after the plant ended production in 1999. By then, Carlos Jr.'s son Bob was also working there. The *El Paso Times* commemorated the "multigenerational contributions to ASARCO" in February 1999, saying: "Just look at all the families who have worked at ASARCO, dedicated laborers who have toiled and [sweated] at the plant for generations and generations, sometimes fathers and sons, sometimes only brothers—people like the Floreses, the Arellanos; the Lermas, Arturo, Mike, Manny, Luis, and before them, their father Pedro." For many Mexican workers, their labor at ASARCO was central to their identity as individuals and as members of a com-

munity. Through the hardships and challenges, they had become smelter men and company men. The smelter was, as Rogelio Carlos Jr. told the *El Paso Times*, "in our blood."[120]

Smelter Families

By its size and prominence, the smelter touched the lives of all of the people who called Smeltertown home. The sights, sounds, and smells from the earliest years of its operation were a constant reminder of the industrial character of the community and its dependence on the smelter's existence. Former Smeltertown residents remembered the smell of the exhaust and other emissions from the plant—a fine yellow dust of sulfur that rained out of the smokestacks in the mornings, the soot that kept the locals from leaving their white clothing on the clothesline overnight. Residents also had vivid memories of the noise; the constant churning of machinery operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and the sound of freight and passenger trains passing through the community were ever-present reminders of the industries at the core of the community. The ominous blare of the plant's emergency siren was always followed by fear that a husband, father, or brother had been injured or killed at work. Though rare, a strong explosion at the plant could shatter the glass windows in El Alto, necessitating the immediate evacuation of homes.[121] In moments like these, there was little question as to industry's role in the life of the community. For many residents, these were a fact of life. In the most fundamental ways, the smelter defined the lives of Smeltertown's residents.

Furthermore, while smelter work transformed Mexican workers into smelter men, it also reconfigured relationships between family members and helped to define their roles in contributing to the household economy. The schedules of women and children, as members of smelter families, mirrored those of their counterparts at the plant. The smelter counted on women not only to provide wholesome, clean homes for its present workers but also to produce and raise future workers. More important, while men strove to achieve the wages and stature that would allow them to be the breadwinners of the family, women provided critical gendered work that kept the household running. Women performed the domestic tasks—cooking nutritious meals for the family, cleaning the house, washing clothes—as well as raising the children and teaching them their respective roles in the home. Girls learned early on the importance of women's work to the household. María Palacio, one of Julia González's daughters, distinctly recalled her initiation to women's work. "By the age of 9 years old I was making tortillas. I knew how to make tortillas and my mother and I used to fix the . . . dinner in the afternoon," she said. "That's why I tell [people] 'I was born in the kitchen and I'm gonna die in the kitchen! [laughter].'" Her sisters did all of the washing and ironing and housecleaning. From the beginning, María understood that these chores were essential: "And everybody had to work. You know, not for somebody else, but at home."[122]

Boys learned their responsibilities from an early age as well. While girls were given domestic duties in the home, young boys' tasks were generally associated with the kinds of physical work that would someday earn them a wage. Julia González's sons chopped and stacked the wood that the family used in its wood-burning stove and that their elderly grandmother, one of Smeltertown's street vendors, sold around the neighborhood. When they were older, young men found intermittent work as caddies for Anglo country club members, some of whom likely held management positions at one of Smeltertown's industrial firms.[123] Other chores and work opportunities placed these youths in closer contact with the male-defined work at the smelter. Many boys took their fathers' lunch to the gates of the smelter at break time. Jesús Gutiérrez was about five years old when he started taking lunch to his father.[124] Some boys worked as scouts and water boys in the smelter, while others, like Andrés Ortíz, found employment at an early age in one of the other industries in the area. Ortíz began working at the Southwestern Portland Cement plant for two or three summers in the 1910s when he was still in school.[125] Eventually, young men and women enrolled at the Smelter Vocational School, further reinforcing the importance of the gendered division of labor. The role of industry in reshaping the lives of women and children is clear. At the same time the men were establishing their work identities at the smelter, women and children were figuring out the part they would play in the family economy.

A very small percentage of married women listed in both the 1920 and 1930 censuses earned a wage outside the home (less than 4 percent in both decades). On the one hand, this seems to suggest that such work was rarely acceptable. Outside employment might challenge the masculine role of breadwinner that smelter men worked to attain. María Palacio said that although her mother Julia had worked as a laundress before she wed Marciano González, once she married her husband did not want her to work—she joked that it was probably because there were so many kids to care for. Sabina Alva tearfully remembered quitting her job as a seamstress at the Popular Dry

Goods Company (a local department store) even though her husband was on strike at the smelter, because her son suggested that her employment might make her husband the target of ridicule by his coworkers. These two brief anecdotes suggest how notions of gender had a powerful place in the minds of Mexican smelter workers.[126]

Another explanation for the low numbers of working women might be that census enumerators failed to capture the full range of women's options available to supplement their family's income. Smeltertown's industrial and commercial economy created opportunities for women to contribute in less formal, though no less significant, ways through the extension of their household duties. In some cases, they prepared large meals at lunch, and workers left the plant to eat at home or at one of a number of "restaurants" for a small charge. Marciano González's wife Julia operated one such informal eatery. Similarly, Sabina Alva's aunt ran her small restaurant in El Alto for years, and Doña Chencha, who opened a small store that sold shaved ice and candies out of her home in Smeltertown, also prepared lunches for workers, which her sons delivered to the plant's gates at noon and 5:00 P.M. In addition to the several restaurateurs, some older women earned an income as landlords, collecting rent on their properties. In the 1920s and 1930s, Andrés Ortíz's mother rented out twenty-two small houses in the neighborhood, which brought in roughly ten to fifteen dollars a month.[127] A number of women, including Ortíz's mother, worked as *parteras* (midwives) in the community, and some charged a flat rate to help deliver babies.[128] Also, some young women worked as teachers both inside and outside of the home; Alva remembered several who operated escuelas particulares in Smeltertown. Graduates of the Smelter Vocational School, like Luz Luján (Perales), had the opportunity to teach vocational classes. Expanding their gendered roles thus allowed women to help sustain the family financially without directly undermining the position of the man of the house.

There were, of course, women—married and single—who did work outside their homes. For the most part, women's options consisted of positions that extended private work into the public realm. The largest numbers of women in the 1920s and 1930s worked as domestics or maids for private families or as laundresses for families, professional laundries, or the smelter hospital. Prisciliana Torres Rentería and some of her friends from Smeltertown, for example, worked as maids for families in El Paso, taking the streetcar downtown to find work; María Palacio's aunt was a maid in a home on Smelter Terrace.[129] Women also found work as street vendors and peddlers, or as

Women workers at ASARCO, ca. 1940s. During World War II, Mexican women filled the jobs of smelter men. The family of Herlinda Salas (*top row at far left*) shared this photograph. Photo courtesy of the Salvador Salas Family Photograph Collection, El Paso.

clerks or proprietors of small general stores; others sold items like wood, milk, and cheese from carts throughout the neighborhood. Panfilo Dueñez's aunt was even known to sell a little bootleg liquor on the side.[130] There were also seamstresses and a teacher, and a few women worked in the smelter clinic and offices. These women, like so many others, were active participants in the economic life of the Smeltertown community, though their opportunities to earn money were determined along gendered lines.

Although smelter work was strongly identified as men's work, young women filling labor shortages during World War II challenged the gender barrier if only temporarily. According to employee records, a number of women entered the smelter between 1942 and 1946. In the sample of all ASARCO employee records, women represented 3 percent of new employees in the 1940s. Women in the Smeltertown sample helped fill vacant positions in slightly

larger numbers, constituting 14 percent of new employees in this period. Like the men who left their jobs to serve in the armed forces, the women in both groups were almost exclusively Mexican American. Prisciliana Torres Rentería began working at ASARCO in 1943, shortly after the death of her husband, a longtime ASARCO employee.[131] Rentería said she performed the same type of work as the men. "Well, see, I got to do a number of jobs," she explained, "but one thing that I have never forgotten was when we worked the reverbs, which was where they melted ores, and there you had to wear these shoes with very thick soles, like out of wood, because it was a terrible heat that you just couldn't stand! And we had to push wheelbarrows and take them over where they went into the reverbs. And also up there where the trains came in filled with materials . . . to unload or load." Rentería worked alongside her friends Herlinda Salas and Leonor López, who performed the same type of work as the male employees, and for the same pay. In fact, it was this promise of equal pay that was so alluring; although the work at the smelter was very physically demanding, Rentería noted, it paid much better than cleaning houses.[132] According to employee cards and former workers, the smelter released these women as men returned from military service.[133] Like other wartime workers, ASARCO's smelter women had answered the call to support their men and their country in time of need, but, when the war ended, they were asked to leave so smelter men could resume their rightful place. The few women who managed to remain on the payroll were transferred to less arduous positions in the office or equipment rooms. Rogelio Carlos Jr. remembered a woman who had begun working during the war who did not retire from ASARCO until shortly after his arrival in the 1960s.[134] Although certainly in the minority, women played an important role at the smelter, and their entry into industrial work was a result of the strong influence of the smelter in their community and in their lives. But their immediate release after the return of smelter men also perpetuated the rigid division of labor that defined smelter work as ultimately men's work.

"We Were Smelter People": Rewriting Narratives of Work and Persistence

Manuel Gonzales—machinist, smelter man, World War II veteran, father and grandfather—was a man of few stories. As his granddaughter, that is how I remember him. He was never really one to regale us with tales of the past, though we managed to find out bits and pieces about his life over the years. I have vivid memories of playing on the big porch at my grandparents' home in Buena Vista and catching a glimpse of him walking up the hill from his job at the smelter. Dressed neatly in a button-down shirt, slacks, and his standard wing-tipped shoes, he carried a big black lunchbox in one hand and, if we were lucky, a treat like a book of paper dolls in the other. When he died in December 2006, my mother told me that she herself knew little about the job where her father spent his working days. Growing up, she knew he was a machinist at ASARCO. She saw him leave and return each day, dressed in his usual dapper manner, and on Fridays he brought with him his oily, stained work uniform that her mother washed in a separate load. She knew he was a union man, and that meant in the event of a strike her father would take his turn on the picket line. During one particularly long and drawn-out confrontation, when strike pay from the union grew thin, her father took a construction job to bring in much-needed income for the family. This strike stood out in her memory, not for the details of the demands or even its unusual length. Rather, it was the first time she had ever seen her father return from a long day of work sweaty and covered in dirt. It was then that she understood that her father labored with his hands. At the smelter, Manuel could shower away the oil and grime that came from a hard day's work, put on a fresh set of clothes, and bring home his dirty uniform to be washed. By contrast, his construction worker's uniform was harder to discard.

As I considered these memories in greater depth, I realized that Manuel Gonzales had been telling us his story all along. My grandfather's ability and choice to step out of his work clothes at the end of the day provides insight into how he and other smelter men viewed their own sense of identity in relation to their working lives. ASARCO gave Mexican smelter workers the opportunity to shed the uniform that the border labor system had forced them to wear: that of racially inferior, transient, unskilled, and exploitable laborers. The uniform they chose in its place was that of proud, permanent, smelter men who challenged the racialized labor system in which they found themselves through hard work, physical strength, and the knowledge and skills that came from years of service. In assuming this uniform, smelter workers crafted a new narrative of their experience. In this story, they were members of a permanent class of workers with deep roots and community ties. The stories of grandfathers and fathers emigrating from Mexico to work in the smelter, of wives and children preparing and delivering them food, and of

successive generations finding better jobs and pay established their long history in Smeltertown and the border region, and connected them in intimate ways to the company that gave the city life. They were proud of these accomplishments and of being a part of the ASARCO family. It gave them and their families a distinct place in El Paso's history.

4 We Were One Hundred Percent Mexican

Eramos cien porciento Mexicanos (We were one hundred percent Mexican)
—JOSÉ "CORONA" LUJÁN, former Smeltertown resident

Resting on the bluff against the gates to the massive steel structures of the smelter, the picturesque adobe chapel eventually called San José de Cristo Rey held a prominent and symbolic place in Mexican Smeltertown. It was, first and foremost, a spiritual home for the largely Catholic community, a place where its members fulfilled the obligations of their faith by baptizing their children, sanctifying their marriages, and receiving the last rites as required by church law. However, its significance in the lives of Esmeltianos was also rooted in a more basic and intimate connection: it was a place residents made with their own hands. Smeltertown's pioneers gave of their limited wages, time, and manual labor to build the church structure. Even after its completion, parishioners continued to contribute to the maintenance of the building and later additions. It is no surprise, then, that when Father J. M. Bertrant called upon parishioners in 1924 to construct a stone grotto on the side of the church in honor of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, they responded enthusiastically. As part of the project, Bertrant asked members of the parish to serve as patrons and proposed a ceremony to mark the laying of the first stone—to be blessed by the bishop of El Paso. This first stone was a hollowed piece of concrete with a lid, and in the dedication of the grotto as a community space Bertrant encouraged parishioners to deposit in the cavity items of special significance to them. More than one hundred Mexican men and women accepted the honor of serving as patrons of the grotto. As might be expected, the items selected to be placed in the cornerstone included a list of the patrons, photographs of former and current parish priests and the bishop, and issues of assorted Catholic newspapers such as the *Hoja Parroquial de Smelter*. Patrons also chose to include a set of U.S. and Mexican coins, a collection of paper currency from the Venustiano Carranza and Porfirio Díaz governments in Mexico, and pictures of the smelter buildings.[1] The blessing