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**“Porque tenían sangre de ‘NEGROS’”:¹ The Exclusion of Mexican Children
from a Louisiana School, 1915-1916**

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Abstract

This article examines the exclusion of Mexican children from a Louisiana public school in 1915-1916. A school board trustee threw the children out of the school because he saw them as racially mixed and used the socially recognized argument that they had “negro blood.” Although school officials did not see Mexican children as Black or White, their *mestizo* appearance became a racial marker. Given this time and location—where legal segregation was understood in Black and White terms—Mexicans posed a dilemma because they did not fit into the binary racial system. Although the Mexican consul conducted an investigation and the Mexican Ambassador filed a complaint to the U.S. Department of State, the case was never resolved. We want to broaden the conversation about the racialization of Mexicans in public schools by highlighting the complexities of race and segregation in the deep South.

Keywords: School Segregation, Deep South, Mexican American

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¹ Lozano, 1916. “Porque tenían sangre de Negros” translates to “because they had Negro blood.”

Introduction

I have the honor to bring to Your Excellency's attention a complaint I have received from the Mexican Consul at New Orleans, Louisiana, relative to the attitude assumed by a Mr. Ford, a member of the Local Board of Education, of Cheneyville, La., who has forcibly prevented several Mexican children from attending school, on the plea that they are mixed blood and ought not to be allowed to attend the school where American children are receiving their education. I am informed that Mr. Ford has carried his determination to keep the above mentioned children out of school to the extent of menacing them and their parents with violent personal injury if they insisted in entering the school building, and to this end, he stationed himself at the door entrance and actually forced the children to return to their homes. (Arredondo, 1916)

The excerpt above is taken from a letter written by Eliseo Arredondo, Mexican Ambassador to the United States, to Robert Lansing of the U.S. Department of State on February 21, 1916, regarding the exclusion of four Mexican children from a White school in Cheneyville, Louisiana. The complaint asserted that a school trustee had thrown the Mexican children out of a White school, threatened their parents, and refused to re-admit them because they were racially mixed. The Mexican Ambassador called on the U.S. Department of State to help “prevent this unjust discrimination” (Arredondo, 1916).

In 1916, public schools in the South were segregated into White and Black schools under the “separate but equal” doctrine (Anderson, 1988) sanctioned by the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Mexican families and their children were entering a region of the nation where very little was known about them, where their numbers were small, where their racial/ethnic status was uncertain, and where rigid boundaries were drawn between Black and White communities in all avenues of life

This was also an era when the Mexican Revolution was raging, when World War I was starting to intensify, when diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States became tense, and when D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* was released (PBS, n.d.). Indeed, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was pushing thousands of Mexicans to the United States. They were seeking refuge and employment in America. In addition, relations between Mexico and the United States were strained because of a political incident that took place in Mexico in 1914.

The United States military forces landed at Veracruz, Mexico, and occupied that port city for more than 6 months. The occupation was, in short, over the treatment of American nationals in Mexico (Gomez-Quiñones, 1994; Quirk, 1962). Finally, race relations in the United States intensified during this period. *Birth of a Nation*, the silent film directed by D. W. Griffith, was released in 1915. The film chronicled two families after the Civil War and during Reconstruction. More than anything else, the film portrayed Black men (White actors in Black faces) as unintelligent and sexually aggressive toward White women, and the Ku Klux Klan was cast as heroic (Wormser, 2002).

This was also an era when Mexican consulates in the Southwest were beginning to receive complaints about how Mexican children were being mistreated, segregated, and excluded from schools (Exclusión de Niños en las Escuelas, 1911; Exclusión de Niños Mexicanos, 1919). In the Southwest, the Mexican consulate was one of several resources Mexicans could draw upon for redress of their complaints. In certain established communities, Mexicans had organized for their own advocacy and in some instances had liberal allies to pursue redress for the mistreatment of Mexican children. Mexican consulates, however, were also registering complaints about Mexicans in their schools and communities from locations outside of the Southwest. In the South, there were fewer sources of social power for Mexican immigrants, and the Mexican consulate served as an important resource to draw attention to the struggles of Mexican residents.

In this article, we seek to understand the experiences of Mexican children in the Jim Crow South in a Louisiana community in 1915-1916 to drive further the conversation about their racialization and its impact on their experiences in public schools. This is a case study documenting the exclusion of Mexican children from a White school by a local school trustee because he perceived them as racially mixed. This case study further documents how school officials in the parish responded to their removal, what the Mexican consulate in New Orleans found and reported, and how the Mexican Ambassador to the United States and the U.S. Department of State responded, respectively, to the incident.

The story in this case study, however, is incomplete. We do not know if this case was ever resolved. That is, we were unable to uncover or infer whether the Lopez and Perez children involved in this case were placed in White schools, Black schools, or whether they

were allowed to attend school at all.² To complicate the story further, available school board minutes provide no record of discussion of the incident by school trustees, and the incident was not reported in the local newspaper, the *Alexandria (LA) Daily Town Talk*. Finally, although the U.S. Department of State ordered the Louisiana Governor to investigate the incident and that order was passed on to the State Superintendent of Instruction, there is no record of an investigation.

Even though the story is incomplete, we have data that illuminate the context of the incident. Specifically, we know that orders were given by the County Superintendent to permit the children to attend school, how his orders were received by multiple actors in the parish, and what the Mexican consulate in New Orleans found. This information is not inconsequential, as it reveals potential differences in the roles school officials played in the education of Mexican students in the South when compared to cases in the Southwest. While we chiefly want to know how school leaders in this Louisiana community responded to the school trustee’s actions to keep Mexican children out of a White school, we are also interested in understanding how Mexican children were perceived in a place and time where legal segregation was understood in exclusively Black and White terms.

We argue in this article that while Mexican children in this Louisiana parish were most likely not seen as Black or White, their *mestizo* (Indian and Spanish ancestry) appearance became the racial marker that kept them out of a White school. Given this time and location in the deep South, where a dual system of education existed between Whites and Blacks, school authorities were uncertain about the racial classification of Mexican children. To the extent that Mexicans were legally White in the United States, the category in this location was either unrecognized or rejected. We saw in the beginning of this article that a school trustee forced the Mexican children out of the school because he saw them as non-White, as racially mixed and, in order to keep them out of the White school, he claimed they had Black blood. We hypothesize that the school trustee used a “black blood” argument to “legally” justify keeping them out of the White school.

² At this time, Louisiana had not passed a compulsory education law that would have required the Perez and Lopez children to attend school (Jones, 1967), and we found no evidence that the voters of Rapides Parish, the local school district or local ward had approved compulsory education for the area as permitted under Louisiana law.

Methods

We used historical research methods in this case study. In order to access part of our data, we traveled to Mexico City and accessed the *Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada, Acervo Histórico Diplomático, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*. The sources found in the Mexico City archives were written in both English and Spanish. After initial translation of the Spanish language documents was made by the lead author, these translations were professionally reviewed for accuracy. After we analyzed these records, we traveled to Alexandria, Louisiana, and examined school board minutes from the Rapides Parish Schools (school district office) and additional historical sources available at the Rapides Parish Library, the Louisiana History Museum, and the Louisiana State University at Alexandria. In addition, primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, newspapers, census records, pamphlets, unpublished papers, online sources, and other material were used in this study. Data collected from these locations were digitally photographed and organized according to file number and date.

Historical Context

The literature is clear that the racial classification of Mexican Americans in the Southwest was complicated and changed over time. With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (after the United States–Mexican War), the federal government categorized Mexicans as White in order to give them American citizenship. In 1930, the U.S. census enumerated Mexicans under the category of “Mexican race” instead of “White,” but their racial status in the census reverted back to White in 1940 (Martinez, 1997; Wilson, 2003). Although Martinez (1997) states that Mexican Americans were classified as White in the 1950 census, the instructions given to enumerators for the 1940 Census clearly instructed Mexicans to be classified as White unless “definitely of Indian or other non-White race” (Haney-Lopez, 1997; U.S. Census Bureau, 1940, p. 43). Unlike other groups of color in the United States whose racial categories remained the same, Mexican Americans’ race was constructed, altered, and modified over time (Gomez, 2007).

Mexican Americans in the Southwest were legally White but treated as socially “colored” (Powers, 2008). That is, most Americans did not recognize Mexican Americans as White in their schools and communities, and they were barred from many public facilities in American life (Garcia & Yosso, 2013). Despite the absence of state statutes that permitted the school

segregation of Mexican Americans, a 1930 survey by Leis (1931) reported that 84.6% of California schools were, in the words of Garcia and Yosso (2013), segregating “Mexican children entirely or in part from the whites for educational purposes” (p. 72), and in South Texas, 90% of the schools were segregated (Montejano, 1987). Indeed, school officials and school boards of education in the Southwest were careful not to justify the segregation of Mexican children on race alone. Segregation was generally justified using inventive rationales that Mexican children needed to be Americanized and learn English before they could attend school with White children (Blanton, 2004; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel Jr., 1987). In addition, some school boards pointed to the agricultural calendar that many Mexicans followed as justification for separation. Due to the nature of the work and since migrant life often needed to follow the crops, Mexican students would not be able to start school at the same time as White students. School officials argued both that Mexican students’ needs could be better served and that White students would not be held back if the Mexicans were placed in separate schools. Often, the reality was that all Mexican children (or those with Mexican-sounding surnames) would be sent to the “Mexican” school, regardless of when they could start school, whether they could speak English or how long their family had been in the country, and school officials were not interested in making those determinations (Carter, 1970; Gonzalez, 1990). Indeed, it was a contradiction between law, perception, and treatment that made the segregation of Mexican Americans so complicated in the Southwest.

This case study documents the events that occurred in Louisiana in 1915-1916. Very few studies have documented Mexican American challenges to unequal education during this time period. One of the few is Arnoldo De Leon’s (2015) study of West Texas. Part of his book chronicles a 1910 school boycott by Mexican Americans, who sought to overturn racial segregation in schools. In this case, Whites in the school district argued that “Mexicans had no right to complain as long as they were given equal school facilities with the Whites, and in order to gain entrance into the White schools the Mexicans would have to prove that they were deprived of equal treatment” (De Leon, 2015, p. 107). This argument was similar to that used by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1896 *Plessey* decision that ruled “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans satisfied the requirements of the Equal Protection Clause. De Leon (2015) concluded that, at that time, no government agency was able to enforce

desegregation, safeguards for quality education were not available, and the promises made in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo for Mexicans in the United States were not delivered.

The other case during this time period took place in southern Colorado. Donato, Guzman and Hanson (2017) argued that the 1914 case of *Francisco Maestas et al. vs. George H. Shone et al.* was one of the earliest Mexican American legal challenges to school segregation in the United States. The lawsuit took place in a region of the nation where Mexican Americans have deep historical roots. This case was unique because the racial background and linguistic needs of Mexican American children were contested. First, plaintiffs (Mexican Americans) argued their children were racially distinct as Mexicans and used the Colorado Constitution to challenge segregation because the state prohibited public schools from classifying and distinguishing children based on color and race. Defendants (school board members and the superintendent) countered that Mexican American children were Caucasian and claimed they were no different from other White children in the school district. Second, school district officials maintained that non-English speaking Mexican American children were being served in a separate school in order to serve their linguistic needs. The district court judge discovered that school officials had created a policy that sent all Mexican American children to the separate school. To the extent that many Mexican American children were English speaking, the district court judge ruled in favor of Francisco Maestas on the grounds that school officials could not prevent English-speaking Mexican American children from attending schools of their choice in general and schools that were closer to their homes in particular.

Our case study in Louisiana unfolds differently. Rather than a community movement such as the school boycott in West Texas or the legal challenge in Colorado, this incident occurred in Louisiana's plantation country, a location with few Mexicans and without the benefits of an organized Mexican community. In this case, White Southerners knew very little about Mexicans. The educational expectations in Cheneyville were less about enforcing desegregation and ensuring quality education for a community and more about providing access to education for a few Mexican students. Also, as we argue, the racial classifications of Mexicans as shaped by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were far away from the minds of the members of this community, whose understandings of race were marked by the Black/White racial binary. It is against the backdrop of this time and location that we want to understand how school officials in this southern community responded to Mexican children.

Race, Segregation, and the Deep South

The history of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the South was beginning to emerge. Historian Julie Weise (2008) found that Mexicans arriving in Louisiana and Mississippi during the early 20th century had varied experiences that depended on social class, skin color, and where they lived and worked. Indeed, life was different for Mexicans who lived in the Mississippi Delta compared to those who settled in New Orleans. New Orleans was racially diverse, urban, and cosmopolitan. It also had historical connections to Latin America. Mexican immigrants coming to New Orleans were from diverse social classes, and their immigration more closely resembled that of European immigrants as they arrived by boat rather than crossing the border in the American Southwest (Weise, 2008). New Orleans was also unique in that it had a variety of ethnic communities that were pursuing social mobility in the context of Jim Crow. These communities provided a variety of models for addressing racialization and its consequences (Weise, 2008). As middle class Mexicans moved into New Orleans, Weise notes that some were able to obtain the social benefits of Whiteness. This, however, did not mean skin color was unimportant for Mexicans. Weise, in fact, describes Armando Amador, the Vice Consul of Mexico in New Orleans during the late 1920s. She describes how Amador was highly educated, multilingual, a journalist, novelist, and poet before and after he worked as Consul for the Mexican government. To the extent that Amador was a *mestizo*, Weise (2008) recognized that in “Louisiana his racial descriptors might have earned him a spot in the back train car along side another mixed-race intellectual, Homer Plessy” (p. 763). However, Amador remained silent about his race. Mexicans like Amador with social status could rely on class and culture to mitigate the effects of Jim Crow. Others, however, had to remain mindful of the color line in New Orleans.

Weise (2015), however, found that within 100 miles of New Orleans, where sugar-producing areas of the state recruited Mexicans for low-wage agricultural work that was performed by black laborers, “Mexicans were definitely not considered to be white” (p. 35-36). Indeed, Mexicans in the Mississippi Delta had a much different experience. To the extent that Mexicans went to the Delta to pick cotton and to work as wage laborers, they faced significant barriers and they were unable to achieve social mobility (Weise, 2008). Conditions were harsh

in the Delta, Mexicans were seen as non-Whites, and Jim Crow also applied to them (Weise, 2008).

These experiences, however, were not limited to the Mississippi Delta or other rural areas outside of New Orleans. Mexicans were rejected in many Southern and border-state communities. In 1911, for example, Juan Almazán (1911) filed a complaint with the Mexican Consulate in Washington D.C. about his experience in St. Louis, Missouri, a border state between north and south. In his hand-written letter to the Mexican Consulate, Almazán described how he was invited by his White supervisors to have a beer at a local tavern. When they arrived at the establishment, Almazán was denied entry and was not served. He was denied service not because he was seen as Black, but because he was “*Indio*.” In his letter, Almazán conveyed the message to the Consulate that he was aware of his racial identity and that “*aun lo seré [Indio] ... soy ciudadano Mexicano*” [even though I am Indian, I am a Mexican Citizen]. Almazán understood his racial identity and knew he was an indigenous Mexican. But, he said, he was a Mexican citizen. He wanted to make a point to the Mexican Consulate that his Mexican citizenship in America was meaningless.

In 1918, Luis Rincón (1918) also filed a complaint with the Mexican Consulate in Washington, D.C. He informed the Consulate that he had been barred from restaurants, the theater, hotels, and other public establishments in Maryville, Tennessee. Rincón was denied service in Maryville’s establishments because he was “Mexican.” That same year, the Mexican Consulate in Washington, D.C. received another complaint; Mexicans were being denied admission to public parks in Oklahoma City (Seguin, 1918).

It is safe to say that the racialization of Mexicans in the South was complicated and it depended on context. In New Orleans, middle and upper class Mexicans may have had access to White privilege but they appeared to be careful about claiming biological Whiteness because of their *mestizo* roots and national politics in Mexico. They pursued “Whiteness” in New Orleans not on legal or biological grounds, but based on culture and class (Weise, 2008). In the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the South, the Mexican experience was similar to that of Blacks. They were rejected, exploited, and Jim Crow also applied to them. It is in the rural South where this case study emerges.

Cheneyville

Located approximately 25 miles south of Alexandria, Louisiana, the county seat of Rapides Parish, Cheneyville was settled in 1811 by Protestant immigrants from South Carolina. The town was named after William Fendan Cheney, a merchant who settled in the banks of the Bayou Boeuf Country. Cheneyville and its surrounding communities, said Jimmie Charlene Hammond, became known for its plantations. It was also “one of the finest agricultural areas in the state” (Hammond, 1967, p. 2). The town’s economy prospered not only because of its cotton and sugar cane industry, which were supported by sharecropping, but also because of its proximity to the Red River, a tributary to the Mississippi River. Its location allowed growers to ship cotton “down the bayou and on to New Orleans” (Hammond, 1967, p. 13).

Similar to other locations in the Deep South, the population in Rapides Parish was Black and White. Other racial minority groups were relatively small. Between 1910 and 1920, the population in Rapides Parish grew from 44,545 to 59,444. Ward 3 (the Cheneyville area) grew from 5,918 to 5,957, and the village of Cheneyville grew from 498 to 678. During these years, the White population in Rapides Parish grew from 20,968 to 33,250, foreign Whites dropped from 1,389 to 1,170, Blacks grew from 21,445 to 24,992, Native Americans dropped from 102 to 14, and Chinese grew from 7 to 8. The Mexican-born population in the state of Louisiana grew from 1,641 to 2,399, from 275 to 1,242 in New Orleans, and from 22 to 112 in Rapides Parish. There were about 11 Mexican-born residents in Cheneyville in 1920 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1913, 1922).

Rapides Parish was operating a dual system of education where Black and White children attended separate schools. As the school board minutes noted, there were “white schools” and “colored schools.” In 1914-1915, there were 240 White and 174 Black children attending schools (Rapides Parish School Board, 1915). The demographic profile of Rapides Parish and the community of Cheneyville was largely Black and White. Mexicans in the state, in the parish, and in Cheneyville were very small in numbers.

The Cheneyville Incident

The incident in Cheneyville began with the exclusion of four Mexican children from a White school by a local school trustee. It is important to understand who the school trustee, Walter P. Ford, was in the community and why he was so adamant about keeping Mexican

children out of the school. Born in 1848, Ford was a boy during Antebellum America and the Civil War, a young man during Reconstruction, and a planter, businessman, Baptist deacon, and school trustee during his adult years (Obituary for Walter P. Ford, 1916). Ford became an influential citizen and a person with relative wealth. His roots ran deep in the community, as he was the son of William P. Ford (Stafford, 1946), the Louisiana planter who purchased Solomon Northup, the free Black man from New York who was abducted in Washington, D.C. in 1841, the Black man who was sold into slavery, and the Black man who spent *Twelve Years a Slave* in the Red River region of Louisiana (Northup, 1853). Raised on a plantation, Walter P. Ford had steadfast beliefs about race and segregation. After he learned that Mexican children were attending the White school in Cheneyville in the fall of 1915, he forced them out because he saw them as racially mixed.

After Ford pushed the Mexican children out of the White school, written communication began to flow in the Parish between the County Superintendent, D. B. Showalter, the school principal, J. M. Johnson, a school trustee, W. J. Orr, and a local resident, Ivey Cannon. Our data show that Orr and Cannon both wrote to County Superintendent Showalter on the same day. School trustee Orr informed Showalter that a “few Mexican children have been for a few days to our school and lately they have been objected to and sent home” (Orr, 1915). Orr did not mention who had thrown the Mexican children out of the school, but he was clear that they were forced out because they were racially “mixed.” Orr also distanced himself from these actions, stating that he and some of the teachers were not involved in the exclusion of these children. Orr requested that the County Superintendent come to Cheneyville to have the issue resolved (Orr, 1915).

But it was not as simple as it appeared. Trustee Orr did not seem to tell the entire story. On the same day Orr sent his letter, Ivey Cannon, a young woman who lived near Cheneyville, also wrote to Showalter. Cannon knew the Mexican children who were denied entrance to the school. In fact, the Mexican children and their parents were living and working on her father’s property. Records show that Ivey Cannon had previously spoken with Showalter over the phone and followed up with a letter. In her letter to Showalter, Cannon (1915) claimed that after they had spoken, “I sent the Mexican children to the school.” However, counter to the letter that school trustee Orr had written to Showalter that suggested he and the teachers at the school were not involved, Cannon (1915) claimed that

“the teachers refused to give them [Mexican children] seats.” It appeared that some teachers at the school were refusing to seat Mexican children in class. Cannon (1915) continued to explain that Mr. Ford and Mr. Johns, two of the three school trustees, were refusing to admit Mexican children into the school because they had “negro blood” (Cannon, 1915). Cannon (1915) retorted that the Mexican children did not have Black blood. While it was not clear what role trustee Orr and the teachers were playing in keeping Mexican children out of the school, it was Ford and Johns, said Cannon, who forced Mexican children out of the school and were refusing to re-admit them. Cannon (1915) told Showalter, “Ford stood at the gate this morning and sent the children home.”

Showalter (1915) immediately wrote a letter to the Cheneyville principal, J. M. Johnson, to inform him that he knew “some Mexican children, attending your school, have been excluded.” Showalter (1915) explained that he had consulted with the District Attorney and found that there was “no law that would exclude from the White schools Mexican children.” Acting under legal advice, Showalter wrote to the principal “...to request that you admit said children.” In response to Showalter, Principal Johnson claimed he “had nothing to do in keeping the Mexican children out of school” (Johnson, 1915). In fact, said Johnson, he informed “those people we could not keep them out and that I would not attempt it.”

The New Orleans Mexican Consulate’s Report

It is not clear who contacted Francisco Villavicencio, the Mexican Consulate in New Orleans, about the exclusion of Mexican children in Cheneyville, but it became evident that he quickly became involved. Seeking assistance from the Mexican consulate was not unusual. When Mexicans in the Mississippi Delta faced problems in their communities during the 1920s and 1930s, said Weise (2015), they “turned to the Mexican consulate in New Orleans” (p. 50). Thus, Head Consul Villavicencio in New Orleans directed special agent Salvador Lozano to conduct an investigation of the incident and to report back to him. In his report, Lozano (1916) informed Villavicencio that the case would be resolved in a manner that would be acceptable to Mexico, given the assistance he had received from various individuals in the community. Given Lozano’s findings, it appeared that the issue was not resolved.

The report, written in Spanish, read as though Lozano began the investigation with phone calls, but he ultimately drove to Rapides Parish to interview individuals who were

involved in the case. Lozano reported that in October of 1915 four Mexican children were removed from the Cheneyville School under the leadership of Principal J. M. Johnson (Lozano, 1916). Lozano had spoken with Ivey Cannon. Cannon informed Lozano that when she found out that the Mexican children were thrown out of the school, she confronted the principal (Lozano, 1916).

The principal told Cannon that it was W. P. Ford and U. H. Johns who had thrown the Mexican children out of the school because they were racially mixed and refused to have them interact with White children because they had “*sangre de ‘NEGROS’*” (Lozano, 1916). Lozano (1916) claimed that although Principal Johnson had disagreed with Ford and Johns, they continued to ban Mexican children from the White school. In fact, Lozano reported that Ford came to the school, positioned himself in front of the door, threatened the children, and told them to go home. In addition, Ford told Mexican children that he would physically harm them if they attempted to return to the school. Lozano also found that Ford had threatened the Mexican parents. As Lozano learned about Walter P. Ford, he characterized him as arrogant and despotic.

Given Ford’s actions, Cannon contacted Showalter to inform him what Ford had done (Lozano, 1916). To the extent that Showalter subsequently ordered Principal Johnson to reinstate Mexican children into the school, Lozano (1916) discovered that Ford continued to impose himself and prohibited Mexican children from attending the school. Lozano made clear in his report that most of his information was orally communicated and most of it was coming from Ivey Cannon and her father. At first, said Lozano, the Cannons were unwilling to put anything in writing because they feared Walter P. Ford. They feared the financial repercussions they could suffer and the power and influence he possessed in the community. But Ivey Cannon ultimately made a formal complaint (the letter she had written) because of the harm Ford was imposing on Mexican children and their parents. The Cannons, the report noted, were willing to assist the Mexican Consulate in any way they could.

Up to this point, Lozano (1916) had been unable to obtain sufficient proof of Ford’s actions because the incident had been orally communicated. He went to Alexandria to gather information that would be the hard evidence he needed. He interviewed Jonas Rosenthal and R. S. Cummins, school board president of Rapides Parish and the principal of the grammar school at Alexandria. The essence of the interview was that Rosenthal and Cummins were more than

willing to help resolve the case. Rosenthal, however, wanted to resolve the case internally and did not want the complaint to go to Washington, D.C. Lozano (1916) reported that Rosenthal had also heard that Ford was trying to exclude the Mexican children as a private citizen. In other words, he was not acting in his role as a local school trustee but as an ordinary citizen when he blocked the Mexican children from entering the school. Rosenthal told Lozano that he supported the Mexican Consulate and was in favor of having the Mexican children reinstated into the White school and hoped justice would prevail on the side of the Mexican government.

Lozano (1916) was finally able to acquire information about Ford's actions in writing. County Superintendent Showalter shared the letters with Lozano to show how the district was responding. This was the hard evidence Lozano needed to go forward with the case. Indeed, Showalter wanted to demonstrate that the exclusion of Mexican children in the Cheneyville School did not come from him but from Walter P. Ford. He presented evidence that he had contacted the District Attorney, received legal advice, and ordered Principal Johnson to allow the Mexican children back to the school. The letters also disclosed that Ford was recalcitrant, uncooperative, and that his reason for removing Mexican children out of the White schools was based on race (Lozano, 1916).

To the extent that the issue had not been resolved, New Orleans Consul Francisco Villavicencio contacted the Mexican Ambassador in Washington, D.C. In his letter to the Mexican Ambassador, Villavicencio (1916) informed him of Lozano's investigation and forwarded all the information. After Mexican Ambassador Arredondo received the information, he contacted the U.S. Department of State. The Mexican Ambassador provided the Department of State evidence that Walter P. Ford had removed and was keeping Mexican children out of a White school because they were racially mixed. The Third Assistant Secretary of State (1916) responded and confirmed that they had received the information about Walter P. Ford and how he was “preventing certain Mexican children from attending schools for white children at that place.” It was understood that Mexican Ambassador Arredondo wanted the Department of State to act and to “exert its good offices to prevent this discrimination” (Third Assistant Secretary of State, 1916).

The Department of State confirmed that it would send the Mexican Ambassador's complaint to the Louisiana Governor with the request to investigate the case. The Department of State conveyed to Arredondo that they did “not doubt that the Governor will take steps to

obtain for these Mexican children such educational facilities as the laws of Louisiana may seem to entitle them to” (Third Assistant Secretary of State, 1916).

The Mexican Ambassador received another letter from the Department of State in March of 1916 to inform him that they were aware of the “the alleged refusal of the authorities of Rapides Parish of Louisiana, to permit certain Mexican children to attend schools at Cheneyville” (Second Assistant Secretary of State, 1916). This letter, moreover, displayed that the Governor of Louisiana had ordered the State Superintendent of Instruction to investigate the case. Also, once the Governor received a report from the State Superintendent of Instruction, the Department of State would then respond (Second Assistant Secretary of State, 1916). However, there is no record that the Mexican Ambassador received a report from the Department of State.

Discussion

The complaint about the exclusion of Mexican children in this Louisiana town reached Washington in 1916, but it was not clear why school officials did not record the issue in their school board meetings, why the case was not reported in the local press, and why the Department of State did not receive a report from the Louisiana Governor. We hypothesize that a number of events made it difficult to bring closure to this case. First, Walter P. Ford and D. B. Showalter died when the case was pending. Because two major players in the case passed, the complaint may have been dropped. Walter P. Ford was no longer around to be charged for his actions and there was little reason to see if D. B. Showalter had mishandled the case. Second, Ford’s social and economic standing in the community as a businessman and planter may have influenced the local press not to cover the story. This was not unusual in the parish. In fact, Louisiana historian Sue Eakin (1987) argued that after the *Plessy* decision in 1896, planter action in Rapides Parish was

clear and vocal since they were the government. They also owned the newspapers. So great was their confidence that movements of great importance simmering beneath the surface of society received little, if any, notice. Or, if noticed, they were ridiculed. (p. 47)

In other words, residents with social, political, and economic stature in Rapides Parish were not going to challenge Walter P. Ford. Finally, when the Department of State ordered Louisiana

Governor Luther E. Hall to investigate the issue in March of 1916, his term ended 2 months later. Ruffin G. Pleasant then took office. Because the Governorship in Louisiana was in transition, correspondence could have been lost or ignored, especially if the Department of State did not press the case.

It is unsettling that we do not know what happened to the Lopez and Perez children and their families after the incident. The records of the parish do not list names of individual students, and other available information does not indicate whether they attended school that year, whether “White” or “colored.” Their families also do not appear in the 1920 Census records as residents of the Cheneyville area. Their lives remain largely invisible in the public records.

As we assembled this incident and in spite of what cannot be known, there is much to learn from this case study. It supports some things already known about the racialization of Mexicans in the Southwest. Mexicans were generally not viewed as White in their schools in their communities. But the case raises new questions about Mexicans in the South. In the Black/White racial world of Central Louisiana, there was no consensus on how people like Mexicans, who did not fit into the binary system, should be classified. School officials and community members were divided on how Mexicans should be “raced.” Indeed, there were disagreements about whether Mexican children had “Negro blood.” Ford claimed the Mexican children had Black blood while Ivey Cannon disagreed. But no one in this case claimed Mexican children were White, the legal classification that was given to them by the American government at that time (Gomez, 2007).

As we think about the disagreement that took place about the racial category of the Lopez and Perez children, they positively did not “pass” as White in the Cheneyville school. They were also not of a social or economic standing that could have provided additional leverage to challenge their exclusion from school. Indeed, they were excluded because they were viewed as racially mixed. This attests to the importance of continuing the work on the experiences of Mexicans in the South. We need to better understand the social construct of race as it was applied to Mexican *mestizos* in Southern schools.

This incident also raises new questions about the interaction between race, education, and the local political economy. As we saw, the Lopez and Perez students were attempting to enroll in the White school in late October. According to school records, the White schools

would have been in session for well over a month and the “colored schools” would just be starting so that the Black students could work through the harvest. In instances in the Southwest, school administrators often used this late enrollment and the work life of Mexican families to provide cover for segregating Mexican students. The claim was that their different schedule would be disruptive to White students and that entering a White school at a later date would put Mexican students at a disadvantage. That excuse for enrolling the Mexican students into the “colored schools” would have been readily available for school officials in Cheneyville, but no school official made this argument to justify keeping the Mexican children out of the White school. In fact, there were no attempts or discussions about enrolling Mexican children in a “colored school.” The incident was about keeping “racially mixed” Mexican children out of the White school. The controversy, it seemed to us, was about Mexican children’s access to public education in the community.

This case points to a difference in how race was perceived and acted upon in this place and time. The social context of this community was different from that of other cases in the Southwest because school officials did not try to mask the exclusion of Mexican children. They excluded Mexican children from a White school on the grounds that they were racially “mixed” or that they had “black blood.” There is more work to be done to determine the extent to which the *mestizo* backgrounds of Mexican children factored in decisions to exclude or segregate them in Southern schools. What we found in this case was that Mexican children in Cheneyville, Louisiana, were excluded from a White public school because of how their race was understood.

This incident also shows the crucial role the Mexican Consulate played at the time the case was occurring and in recounting the incident today. At the time of the incident, the Mexican Consulate provided support to Ivey Cannon and the school officials who were willing to admit the Mexican students into the White school. Several months had passed between the initial complaint by Ivey Cannon and Lozano’s report, and the Mexican students were still excluded from the school. Although we have no evidence of a positive outcome for the Mexican students, it is likely that the situation would not have changed for them without the Consulate’s involvement.

The importance of Mexican Consulates becomes more apparent because it provided additional perspectives (Balderrama, 1982; Gonzalez, 1999). In this case, the report from the

Mexican Consulate provided a point of view that would otherwise have been unavailable in the public records of the time. For example, we gain information about the social context of the incident through reports that Ivey Cannon and her father feared Walter P. Ford. They feared him because of the financial and political power he held in the community. Moreover, we gain further understanding of why incidents involving race are often hidden from the public record. School board president Jonas Rosenthal expressed to investigator Lozano that he did not want the complaint to go to Washington, implying that he would have been pleased to keep other public records devoid of the incident.

In the end, it is the involvement of the Mexican Consulate and the records kept in the Mexico City Archives that preserves what we know about the exclusion of Mexican children from a Louisiana public school. It was the Mexican Consulate that pushed for written evidence that was needed to move the complaint forward. If the records in this incident were limited to those of the dominant groups in Cheneyville (i.e, the local press) and Rapides Parish (i.e., school board minutes) this story would have been lost and certainly could not have been told.

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