

Subsidizing Capitalism

Brickmakers on the U.S.-Mexican Border



Tamar Diana Wilson

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Dedicated to the brickmakers of Mexicali

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Preface

Don Nicolas was partially raised on an impoverished rancho in Sinaloa, where he believes he was born in 1919, two years after the end of the Mexican Revolution. After the birth of his first living son, Diego, in 1936, Don Nicolas began working as a cotton harvester, traveling north from Culiacan through Sonora and to Baja California each year. In 1954, accompanied by his second wife and three children, he decided to stay in Mexicali. There, a distant relative who was a brickmaker (*ladrillero*) taught Don Nicolas the trade. For the next thirty-eight years, and through three more marriages and the birth of five more children, Don Nicolas lived on brickyards (*campos ladrillos*). He and his family first worked as piece-rate laborers on others' brickyards and then rented in their own brickyard. All three of his sons followed this trade, first as part of Don Nicolas's unpaid family labor force, then, after marrying, as heads of their own brick-making concerns. One of Don Nicolas's five daughters, the only one who remained in Mexicali, also married a brickmaker. Two of his sons married daughters of brickmakers.

When Don Nicolas was seventy years old, he and his son, Diego, who was in his early fifties, put a down payment on their own brickyard, and they were still paying for it in monthly installments in 1992.

Diego's children all worked as brickmakers. An older, married grandson bought a flatbed truck and sold his father's, his grandfather's, and others' bricks in the *colonias populares* (squatter settlements), *fraccionamientos* (government-sponsored sites and services settlements), and other construction sites throughout Mexicali. Diego did not allow his daughters to work mixing clay, their feet in icy mud in wintertime or sweating beneath the sun that heats the earth to 120° F during the summer: he feared that it would negatively affect their future childbearing. The daughters performed subsidiary tasks in brickmaking, however.

Don Nicolas and his family illustrate a number of phenomenon typical of brickmakers in Mexicali and elsewhere in Mexico. Initially, brickmakers were usually rural to urban migrants and were landless peasants in their places of origin. Often a relative with brickmaking experience would teach the incoming migrant the methods involved in manufacturing bricks. Brickmaking tends to run in families after the head of household enters the trade. There are endogamous tendencies among brickmakers due to, first, the isolation of brickyards on the periphery of the city and, second, due to this isolation, the narrow social field of brickmakers, which tends to include primarily other brickmakers and their families. Finally, brickmaking often, though not always, involves a trajectory from piece work on someone else's brickyard, to the renting in of a brickyard, to the ownership of one's own brickyard. This trajectory is heavily dependent on the existence of an unwaged family labor force.

Don Nicolas never managed to become a full-fledged brickyard owner during his lifetime, in part because he started so late in life—his sons married and became heads of their own rented-in brickyards, thus depriving him of the benefits of a family labor force—and, in part, because he did not have a wife to help him run his brickmaking enterprise and to organize the family labor force. (Successively, four wives either died or abandoned him for a less onerous life.)

Brickmaking in Mexico is an income-generating activity that falls within the informal sector, the informal economy, or the underground economy, as it has variously been called. Brickmakers generate their own employment, enjoy none of the workers' benefits such as medical insurance and pension plans legislated by the Mexican Labor Laws (*Ley Federal de Trabajo*), and avoid paying taxes—a form of “rent” that could lead to greater family impoverishment or even the disappearance of an incipient or ongoing brickmaking enterprise. In various parts of Mexico, including Mexicali, brickmakers have a unit within the CROC (*Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos*, or Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants).

Not all brickmakers belonged to the CROC, however, and those who did said the unions did little for them besides soliciting their votes. Two roles played by the union were often mentioned by the brickmakers, however. If a brickmaker was so impoverished that he could not afford burial for himself, his wife, or his child, then union members would collect money to buy a casket and a burial plot. Second, the unions pressured the government for new brickyard com-

plexes, when the city expanded to such an extent that new squatter settlements displaced the old brickyards. The government usually responded because the growing city needed the brickmakers' product to build houses, industrial parks, schools, and other structures. The brickmakers relocated even farther to the periphery, and even farther from urban services such as electricity, schools for their children, or even a *tienda* (small store) where they could buy tortillas or drinking water.

Don Nicolas did not belong to the CROC, though his son, Diego, was a functionary in the brickmaker section for many years, having multiple roles. When the new squatter settlement, Colonia Nueva Estancia (a pseudonym), was established in 1992, brickmakers in the area were forbidden to bake their bricks, due to the ovens' contamination of the air. Union members eventually were moved to an unoccupied stretch of land approximately six miles further south; their old brickyards became part of the new colonia, and they were given new ones in exchange. Those who did not belong to the union were not provided this benefit. Don Nicolas and Diego were prohibited from baking bricks on the brickyard they were buying. Initially they both sold unbaked bricks to other brickmakers on the new brickyards. They earned so little, however, that Diego eventually sought another job in the informal sector. He became the night watchman for a warehouse and was paid in cash, with no Social Security benefits. Later he did find a night watchman's job with *seguro* (the package of medical, housing, and pension benefits provided to workers in the formal sector).

I will not write much about the CROC in the following pages, although its constantly expanding role is important in understanding the present and future welfare of the Mexicali brickmakers. The union was the only "formalized" economic aspect of the brickmakers' trade when I initially did fieldwork among them in the early 1990s. Here I am concerned with brickmaking as informal sector work. It is my belief that not only theoretical approaches but the life stories of the brickmakers are important in understanding their lives and positioning in the economic system in which they are immersed.

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Border Subsidy

Gray smoke billows upwards in intermittent puffs
wisps skyward from the brickmakers' wood-fired ovens
erected on brickyards cut through by canals
filled with toxic wastes from factories and foundries
built of mottled hand-made bricks.

Families flock north from Sinaloa, Jalisco, Sonora,
Guerrero, Michoacán and points south:
The newly arrived labor force.
They seek work in the factories and foundries
of Baja California's capital city.

Together they invade weed-infested garbage-strewn
fields outside the city's limits: Form communities
of displaced persons expelled from *ranchos* where there are no jobs;
and they establish *colonias populares* or buy lots in *fraccionamientos*
and live, at first, in shacks of cardboard or discarded wood.

Little by little they replace their dirt-floored provisional abodes
with self-built houses made of mottled brick
like the bricks in the factories, banks, hotels, and shopping malls:
and the brickmakers mold the clay
and the brickmakers fire the bricks.

Tamar Diana Wilson

Introduction

Mexicali, the capital of the state of Baja California and home to the in-migrating brickmakers whose stories are presented in this book, celebrated its 100th birthday on March 14, 2003. Its birth as a commercial and service center in 1903 was due to the inversion of North American capital in the Mexicali Valley, in the interests of growing and processing cotton. Harrison Otis and his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, publishers of the *Los Angeles Times*, founded the Colorado River Land Company in 1902, and under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, they acquired vast tracts of lands in the Mexicali Valley. Cotton cultivation was originally subcontracted to Chinese entrepreneurs who used a largely Chinese labor force (Hu-DeHart, 1985–1986; Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 22 et passim). In the early 1920s, limitations on the use of Chinese labor came first in the form of a hefty head tax on Chinese laborers imported into Baja California (imposed in 1919 by then-governor Estebán Cantú) and second in the form of federal legislation passed in 1923 prohibiting the importation of any foreigner for manual labor (Anguiano Téllez 1995: 76–77).¹

Meanwhile, as a result of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) and its aftermath, many economic and political refugees from central Mexico began arriving in Mexicali and its valley, a point distant from the dislocations occurring elsewhere in Mexico. They were joined by farmworkers returning primarily from Arizona and California. A decade or so later, there was an inflow of Mexican families forcibly repatriated to Mexico during the Great Depression (Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 23, 75–76, 125).

Under the presidency of Lázaro Cardenas (1934–1940)—the president who distributed most land throughout the nation under the 1917 Constitution’s agrarian reform law (Article 27)—large quantities of Mexicali Valley land were bought up from North American interests and distributed to *ejidatarios* (those who hold individual or share collective title to communally owned lands) or

sold to *pequeño propietarios* (small landowners). Up until 1946, the Colorado River Land Company continued to own a third of the Mexicali Valley lands; in that year, the Mexican federal government bought up and distributed these lands as well (Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 87–89, 99). Irrigation works, involving vast networks of canals, had been constructed first by the Colorado River Land Company, and later, after 1937, they were expanded by the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación (National Irrigation Commission) (Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 103). Some of these canals provided water for the making of bricks on the brickyard complexes in Mexicali—the water often diverted for this purpose from local farmers, with or without their consent.

In-migration to Mexicali surged after the completion of the Sonora-Baja California railroad, under construction from 1937 to 1947, which connected Mexicali to the central and southern states of Mexico (Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 31; Martínez, 2002: 1–2). In-migration fueled Mexicali's growth; the city's population growth from 1900 to 2000 can be seen in Table 1.

Many of the new in-migrants eventually acquired lots in *colonias populares* (squatter settlements), established by group invasion or gradual accretion on unoccupied lands and later regularized and extended services by state and municipal governments. The first *colonia popular* in Mexicali was established in 1934. Twenty-five more were formed between then and 1974, with numbers increasing each decade: twelve originated in the 1960s (Fuentes Romero and Casillas, 1983, Table 31: 43). Less were established in the 1970s, but in the five-year period between 1983 and 1987, nine new colonias arose from invasions (Ortega Villa, 1990). One of these colonias was "Colonia Popular," where 18 percent of male heads of household were brickmakers (*ladrilleros*), the majority of whom had previously lived with their families on brickyards on which they labored as piece-rate workers (*maquileros*), rented in, or owned. At least five more colonias were formed by 1992 (among them, "Colonia Nueva Estancia"), when land invasions became illegal.

People continued migrating to Mexicali, especially from the states of Jalisco, Sinaloa, and Sonora; in Colonia Popular, residents came from twenty-one states and the Federal District (Wilson, 1992). In-migrants from other states to Mexicali composed 24.7 percent of the city's population in 1980, 35 percent in 1990, and 31.4 percent in 2000 (INEGI, 1983: 47–48; 1991: 7–8; 2002: 78–79).

Though Don Nicolas and Diego arrived in Mexicali in the 1960s, most of the *ladrilleros* I interviewed had arrived in the 1970s (thus would be counted in the 1980 census) or the 1980s (thus would be

Table 1 Population of Mexicali and of Baja California, 1900–2000

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population of Baja California</i>	<i>Population of Mexicali</i>	<i>Percent of Population of State in Mexicali</i>
1900	7,583	397	5.2%
1910	9,760	1,600	16.3%
1921	23,537	14,599	61.9%
1930	48,327	29,985	62.1%
1940	78,907	44,399	56.6%
1950	226,965	124,362	54.7%
1960	520,165	281,333	54.1%
1970	870,421	396,324	45.5%
1980	1,177,886	510,664	43.3%
1990	1,660,855	601,938	36.2%
2000	2,487,367	764,602	30.7%

Sources: Anguiano Téllez, 1995: 124; CONEPO, 1997: 93; Corona, 1986: 85–90; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), 1991: 7; 2002: 78.

counted in the 1990 census). All of these in-migrants needed housing. Prior to 1992, when land invasions were prohibited, many found lots in colonias populares; others found lots in sites and services settlements (fraccionamientos),² which they still do today. The majority eventually upgrade their initial housing to brick or cement block, with brick being preferred.

I am unsure when brickmaking first began in Mexicali. The first railroad stations in Baja California, and the houses surrounding them, were, from 1937 onward, built of unfired, sun-dried bricks (Martínez, 2002: 2). Up until 1951, with the construction of the Escuela Presidente Aléman (President Aléman School) with bricks, most public buildings—for example, the Palacio del Gobierno (initiated in 1919 to house state government offices) and the Palacio Municipal (initiated in 1924 to house municipal government offices)—were built with reinforced concrete; some public buildings had additions of cement block (Lucero Velasco, 2002). By the late 1950s, fired bricks became more common in construction. Lucero Velasco (2002: 96) attributes this to the “tendencies” and “traditions” of in-migrants coming to Mexicali from central and southern Mexican states. For at least the past three decades, industrial parks, office buildings, and individual houses were among the structures built of handmade, fired bricks. In the pages that follow I will present my methodology in acquiring information about the brickmakers, most of whom I inter-

viewed in their houses in Colonia Popular but also, in some cases, on the brickyards they rented in or owned. I also will relate why I chose to present some of the information as “short stories.”

Methodology

“Colonia Popular,” as I call the squatter settlement where most of the brickmakers (and all of the garbage pickers) I interviewed lived, was established in January 1984 by an invasion of an empty field to the south of the city of Mexicali. In the campaign for the governorship of the state of Baja California in that year, Xicoténcalt Leyva Mortera utilized the slogan: “Un Lote Para Cada Familia Humilde, Es Tu Derecho!” (A [house] lot for every poor family. It is your right!) (Moreno Mena, 1989; Ortega Villa, 1990). After ascending to the governorship, Leyva Mortera established his “Fraccionamientos Populares” program designed to give title to lands already invaded and to provide an orderly process for future land invasions (Ortega Villa, 1990).

In 1985, the legal possession of lands in Colonia Popular was recognized; nonetheless, legal title to house lots had not been surrendered by 2005. Colonia Popular consists of 155 house lots: eight are utilized for a kindergarten and twelve for a primary school. In 1986, electricity became an option for each family resident in the colonia. Each lot owner could sign a contract with the electricity company (Comisión Federal de Electricidad), promising to make monthly payments for the installation of posts and lines. Part of the costs were subsidized by the state and federal governments. By 1991, twelve households still did not have electricity. The families who lived on these lots simply did not have enough resources to pay their portion of the installation costs. Four of these were brickmakers. Of the 157 households from which one or more interviews were taken, twenty-nine (18 percent) of the male heads of household worked as brickmakers.

Between the autumn of 1988 and the winter of 1990, the heads of household (male, female, or both) were interviewed in 151 of the 155 permanently occupied lots. The majority of the initial interviews were retrieved in 1988 with the help of six sociology students from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexicali. New families were moving in constantly to occupy empty lots. I interviewed many of these family heads in 1989 and 1990, for a total of 174 interviews.

Although the interviews were designed to describe the migratory history of the families, work histories also were documented.

Table 2 Place of Origin of Male Brickmaker Heads of Household Residing in Colonia Popular

<i>Place of Origin</i>	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Jalisco	7	24.1	2	50.0	9	27.3
Zacatecas	6	20.7	1	25.0	7	21.2
Sinaloa	4	13.8	—	—	4	12.1
Nayarit	3	10.3	—	—	3	9.1
Michoacán	2	6.9	—	—	2	6.1
Chihuahua	2	6.9	—	—	2	6.1
D. F.	—	—	1	25.0	1	3.0
Mexicali, BCN	5	17.2	—	—	5	15.2
Total	29	99.9	4	100.0	33	100.1

Source: Interviews in Colonia Popular, 1989–1992.

Questions such as what was your occupation before arriving in Mexicali, what was your first occupation upon arriving in Mexicali, and what is your and your spouses' current work were included. The results are a reflection of the occupations engaged in only during that time period, since men frequently change jobs. Only the brickmakers remained in the same occupation over many years, some for a lifetime, and even over generations. In 1991 and 1992, I conducted in-depth interviews with brickmakers about their work, the history of living on brickyards, and their opinions about brickmaking for themselves and their offspring. Furthermore, I visited the new garbage dump and talked to garbage pickers there. Some brickmakers had moved to brickyards from Colonia Popular in the ensuing years, and I re-interviewed them there. I also interviewed and conversed with two families who had never lived elsewhere than on brickyards.

As can be seen in Table 2, the majority (82.8 percent) of the brickmakers who lived in Colonia Popular emigrated into the state of Baja California. Twenty-four percent of male brickmakers came from the state of Jalisco and almost 21 percent from the state of Zacatecas. The four states of Jalisco, Zacatecas, Sinaloa, and Nayarit are the places of origin of 68.9 percent of the male heads of household. Twenty-three of the twenty-four male heads of household (95.8 percent) who emigrated into Baja California were born on *ranchos* (unincorporated rural villages) or in small agricultural towns.

Brickmaking Families

The manufacture of bricks tends to be a family affair. All members of the family help produce bricks. Because the brickyards are isolated on the periphery of the city, far from neighbors, social interaction among the brickmakers who live on the yards where they work tends to be limited to one another. For this reason, sons of brickmakers often marry daughters of brickmakers. Of the thirty-three brickmakers who came to live in Colonia Popular, twenty-nine men and four women, three brickmakers' fathers were brickmakers, four brickmakers' wives' fathers were brickmakers, and three women brickmakers had fathers who were brickmakers.

The ages of the male and female heads of household who work as brickmakers can be seen in Table 3. Of the twenty-nine male brickmakers, 37.9 percent are between twenty and thirty years of age, and 65.6 percent are less than forty years old. Brickmaking is difficult work in Mexicali: it is necessary to work without pausing in temperatures reaching 120° F in the summers and to work without shoes in icy water when excavating the earth or mixing the clay during winter. For this reason, many brickmakers whose children desert the brickyards for other employment seek other work when reaching an advanced age.

The percentages of brickmakers with low educational levels are higher than the percentages for the state of Baja California or for

Table 3 Ages of Men and Women Heads of Household Living in Colonia Popular Who Work Making Bricks: 1989–1990

<i>Ages</i>	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
20–24	4	13.8	1	25.0	5	15.2
25–29	7	24.1	1	25.0	8	24.2
30–34	2	6.9	—	—	2	6.1
35–39	2	6.9	1	25.0	3	9.1
40–44	3	10.3	1	25.0	4	12.1
45–49	2	6.9	—	—	2	6.1
50–54	4	13.8	—	—	4	12.1
55–59	3	10.3	—	—	3	9.1
60+	2	6.9	—	—	2	6.1
Total	29	99.9*	4	100.0	33	100.1*

*Difference from 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Interviews in Colonia Popular, 1989–1992.

Table 4 Level of Schooling of the Brickmakers of Colonia Popular As Compared to the Level of Schooling of the Population Fifteen Years Old and Over in Mexicali and in Baja California

<i>Level of Schooling</i>	<i>Baja California</i>	<i>Mexicali</i>	<i>Brickmakers in Colonia Popular</i>
None or less than			
primary school	23.5	23.8	81.8
Finished primary school	19.1	16.6	6.1
More than primary school	55.1	57.2	12.1
Not specified	2.4	2.4	—
Total	100.1	100.0	100.0

Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 1991; Interviews in Colonia Popular, 1989–1992.

Mexicali as a whole, as can be seen in Table 4. Slightly more than 81 percent of brickmakers have not finished primary school, as compared to slightly over 23 percent for the population of the state and city of Mexicali. Of the men, 41.4 percent have less than one year of schooling, and, including this group, 82.8 percent (twenty-four of twenty-nine) have not completed primary school. Of the women who work as brickmakers, 75 percent have not completed primary school. The use of a family labor force and also the distance between the brickyards and services such as schools and urban transit partially explain these differences. Many of the brickmakers were aware of the need for education for their offspring, however; and in many cases, the children of brickmakers had completed primary school or beyond; Guadalupe's offspring were exceptional in not having finished elementary school.

The majority of brickmaker families residing in the colonia have lived for a period of time on the brickyards where they produce bricks. Of the twenty-one people I asked "Where did you live immediately prior to coming to Colonia Popular?" Fifteen (71%) said they had lived on a brickyard. Another three families had lived on brickyards during the five years prior to acquiring a lot in the colonia. Thus 86 percent of the families with a male head of household who worked as a brickmaker have lived on brickyards in Mexicali. Six families sold their lots in Colonia Popular after the colonia was regularized: five of them made a down payment on or bought brickyards outright with the money they earned from doing so. The others moved to a brickyard that they had already acquired.

Besides the brickmakers who lived in Colonia Popular I also interviewed three brickmaker families who were living on the brickyards at the time of the interview, two of whom previously had house lots in Colonia Popular, thus my sample size was thirty-six.

In 2003, I returned for several weeks in May and June to try to find out what had happened to the brickmaker families: if they were still making bricks, and, if so, if they had moved forward economically. I was able to speak to five brickmaker heads of household, and I obtained information about twenty-seven more (in total, thirty-two of the original thirty-six interviewed) through relatives (ex-wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, sons, daughters, sisters, and/or brothers). The information about the four families in the chapter on women's and children's work on the brickyards (chapter 5) was garnered at that time, as was data on the current price of bricks, observations of the new technology on the brickyards, and a short account of the history of the brickmakers' involvement in the CROC. In August 2003, in pursuit of another study—on the immigration to the United States from Colonia Popular—I was able to interview a brickmaker and his brickmaker son in the Lake Tahoe region of Nevada.

Fiction and Creative Non-Fiction

An anonymous reviewer of one of the preliminary drafts of this book asked me to define “creative non-fiction,” which I was claiming my poetry and vignettes to be. So I reviewed a few books on the subject. One account is that “Creative non-fiction has emerged in the last few years as the province of factual prose that is also *literary*—infused with stylistic devices, tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical narrative poetry. It is fact-based writing that remains compelling, undiminished by the passage of time, that has at its heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to *truthfulness*” (Forché and Gerard, 2001: 1). Aside from their dubious literary value, and although they are “fact based” in the sense of rendering the truth as those who spoke to me saw it, two of my “stories” are fiction rather than creative non-fiction. According to one expert in writing creative non-fiction, creating composite characters crosses the line from non-fiction to fiction (Gerard, 1996: 201). Editing interviews and presenting them in a different order from the one said, and even paraphrasing, do *not*, however, according to the same author, constitute fiction (Gerard, 1996: 120).