

THE BARRIO

by Ernesto Galarza

Focusing Your Attention

1. Have you ever watched someone merge two cultures or tried to blend two cultures yourself? What are the advantages of merging cultures? What are the disadvantages?
2. In the essay you are about to read, the writer compares and contrasts various characteristics of American and Latin American life from the perspective of someone who has come to America for the first time. What do you think are some of the differences between these two cultures? Some of the similarities?

Expanding Your Vocabulary

The following words are important to your understanding of this essay. Start a vocabulary log of your own by recording any words you don't understand as you read. When you finish reading the essay, write down what you think the words mean. Then check your definitions in the dictionary.

barrio: Spanish-speaking neighborhood (title)

mercados: marketplaces (paragraph 1)

chiquihuite: basket (paragraph 1)

pilón: sugar candy (paragraph 1)

Mazatlán: a city in Mexico (paragraph 1)

Judases: images of the disciple who betrayed Jesus (paragraph 2)

Holy Week: the week leading up to Easter (paragraph 2)

promenades: parades (paragraph 2)

plaza: public square (paragraph 2)

cathedral: large church (paragraph 2)

Palacio de Gobierno: town hall (paragraph 2)

vecindades: close-knit neighborhoods (paragraph 3)

mirth: fun, laughter (paragraph 4)

boisterous: noisy (paragraph 4)

compadre: godfather (paragraph 5)

comadre: godmother (paragraph 5)

cherubs: angels depicted as babies with wings (paragraph 5)

mica: a mineral (paragraph 5)

atole: a drink (paragraph 5)

corridos: songs (paragraph 5)

paddy wagon: police van (paragraph 6)

IOUs: debts (paragraph 8)

pochos: Mexicans living in the United States who grew up in the United States (paragraph 9)

chicanos: Mexicans living in the United States who grew up in Mexico (paragraph 9)

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We found the Americans as strange in their customs as they probably found us. Immediately we discovered that there were no *mercados* and that when shopping you did not put the groceries in a *chiquihuite*. Instead, everything was in cans or in cardboard boxes, or each item was put in a brown paper bag. There were neighborhood grocery stores at the corners and some big ones uptown, but no *mercado*. The grocers did not give children a *pilón*, and they did not stand at the door and coax you to come in and buy, as they did in Mazatlán. The fruits and vegetables were displayed on counters instead of being piled up on the floor. The stores smelled of fly spray and oiled floors, not of fresh pineapple and limes.

Neither was there a plaza, only parks which had no bandstands, no concerts every Thursday, no Judases exploding on Holy Week, and no promenades of boys going one way and girls the other. There were no parks in the *barrio*, and the ones uptown were cold and rainy in winter, and in summer there was no place to sit except on the grass. When there were celebrations, nobody set off rockets in the parks, much less on the street in front of your house to announce to the neighborhood that a wedding or a baptism was taking place. Sacramento did not have a *mercado* and a plaza with the cathedral to one side and the Palacio de Gobierno on another to make it obvious that there and nowhere else was the center of the town.

It was just as puzzling that the Americans did not live in *vecindades*, like our block on Leandro Valle. Even in the alleys, where people knew one another better, the houses were fenced apart, without central courts to wash clothes, talk, and play with the other children. Like the city, the Sacramento *barrio* did not have a place which was the middle of things for everyone.

In more personal ways, we had to get used to the Americans. They did not listen if you did not speak loudly, as they always did. In the Mexican style, people would know that you were enjoying their jokes tremendously if you merely smiled and shook a little, as if you were trying to swallow your mirth. In the American style, there was little difference between a laugh and a roar, and until you got used to them you could hardly tell whether the boisterous Americans were roaring mad or roaring happy.

The older people of the *barrio*, except in those things which they had to do like the Americans because they had no choice, remained Mexican. Their language at home was Spanish. They were continuously taking up collections to pay somebody's funeral expenses or to help someone who had had a serious accident. Cards were sent to you to attend a burial where you would throw a handful of dirt on top of the coffin and listen to tearful speeches at the graveside. At every baptism, a new *compadre* and a new *comadre* joined the family circle. New Year greeting cards were exchanged, showing angels and cherubs in bright colors sprinkled with grains of mica so that they glistened like gold dust. At the family parties the huge pot of steaming tamales was still the center of attention, the *atole* served on the side with chunks of brown sugar for sucking and crunching. If the

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party lasted long enough, someone produced a guitar; the men took over and the singing of *corridos* began.

In the *barrio* there were no individuals who had official titles or who were otherwise recognized by everybody as important people. The reason must have been that there was no place in the public business of the city of Sacramento for the Mexican immigrants. We only rented a corner of the city and as long as we paid the rent on time everything else was decided at City Hall or the County Court House, where Mexicans went only when they were in trouble. Nobody from the *barrio* ever ran for mayor or city councilman. For us, the most important public officials were the policemen who walked their beats, stopped fights, and hauled drunks to jail in a paddy wagon we called *La Julia*.

The one institution we had that gave the *colonia* some kind of image was the *Comisión Honorífica*, a committee picked by the Mexican Consul in San Francisco to organize the celebration of the *Cinco de Mayo* and the Sixteenth of September, the anniversaries of the battle of Puebla and the beginning of our War of Independence. These were the two events which stirred everyone in the *barrio*, for what we were celebrating was not only the heroes of Mexico but also the feeling that we were still Mexicans ourselves. On these occasions, there was a dance preceded by speeches and a concert. For both the *cinco* and the sixteenth, queens were elected to preside over the ceremonies.

Between celebrations, neither the politicians uptown nor the *Comisión Honorífica* attended to the daily needs of the *barrio*. This was done by volunteers—the ones who knew enough English to interpret in court, on a visit to the doctor, a call at the county hospital, and who could help make out a postal money order. By the time I had finished the third grade at the Lincoln School, I was one of these volunteers. My services were not professional, but they were free, except for the IOU's I accumulated from families who always thanked me with "God will pay you for it."

My clients were not *pochos*, Mexicans who had grown up in California, probably had even been born in the United States. They had learned to speak English of sorts and could still speak Spanish, also of sorts. They knew much more about the Americans than we did and much less about us. The *chicanos* and the *pochos* had certain feelings about one another. Concerning the *pochos*, the *chicanos* suspected that they considered themselves too good for the *barrio* but were not, for some reason, good enough for the Americans. Toward the *chicanos*, the *pochos* acted superior, amused at our confusions but not especially interested in explaining them to us. In our family, when I forgot my manners, my mother would ask me if I was turning *pochito*.

Turning *pocho* was a half-step toward turning American. And America was all around us, in and out of the *barrio*. Abruptly we had to forget the ways of shopping in a *mercado* and learn those of shopping in a corner grocery or in a department store. The Americans paid no attention to the Sixteenth of September, but they made a great commotion about the Fourth of July. In Mazatlán, Don Salvador had told us, saluting and marching as he talked to our class, that the *Cinco de Mayo* was the most glorious date in human history. The Americans had not even heard about it.