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Research Site: Archives in Mexico City

Project: Rails to Revolution: Railroads, Railroad Workers and Geographies of the Mexican Revolution of 1910

Since 2011 I have been planning to move to Mexico to conduct an extensive archival research project in order to uncover the lost histories of railroad workers during the Mexican Revolution. With the help of a small in-house grant I visited Mexico in the Summer 2013 and I was able to identify key archives and libraries that housed documents, books and maps relevant to my project. Finally, with the help of the Conference of Latinamericanist Geographers Field Study Award and other grants I was able to return to Mexico City to undertake the archival work necessary for my dissertation. With these monies I was able to move from New York City to Mexico City and to find an apartment near my research sites. Because of the U.S. Dollar to Mexican Peso exchange rates I was able to extend my award to fund three months of room and board, and transportation in Mexico City.

This summer I began working on a series of interviews housed at the National Institute of History and Anthropology (INAH) and the Mora Institute. These interviews are part of the Oral History Archives and they contain testimonies of people who participated in the Mexican Revolution. These interviews were recorded in the 1970s and they are an invaluable primary source material for my research. Although there are many interviews in this archive there were several of special interest for my project. Specifically, 20 of these interviews belonged to men who were part of Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s Northern Division. Since my research focuses on the Central Mexican Railroad, the *villistas* were the most prominent users of this line during their 1913-1914 military campaign against the Federal government.

Thus far I have learned that most railroad workers did not join the Revolution in its earlier phases. During the democratic Revolution railroad labor contributed to the cause of the Revolutionaries in small ways, such as delaying trains or giving refuge to revolutionaries persecuted by the government. Once the Revolution was fully underway, the Constitutionalist movement fighting against the Huerta Regime made widespread use of railroad infrastructures to defeat government forces. During this phase railroad worker’s participation at all levels of the railroad’s hierarchy is very common. However, there were differences between rank and file workers, and managers and administrators. I am still looking for more sources that discuss this divergence and I expect to find more information on this conflict once I begin reviewing the documents of the Department of Labor.

Findings from these interviews also indicate that during the third phase of the Revolution some railroad workers switched sides and supported the military general

Alvaro Obregón. Although some workers still supported Villa, the union bureaucracy, white collar workers and railroad administrators sided with general Obregón after he agreed to give special favor to the railroads in his new government. Again, I have yet to find the details of these agreements yet I am sure that I will be able to find this information once I begin working on the archives of the Department of Labor.

In addition to these oral histories I have also taken advantage of my stay at INAH's Department of Historical Studies and I have made good use of their library. In particular, Migue Ángel Berumen's book *Mexico: fotografía y revolución* (2009) has been very useful to visually represent the role of the railroads and railroad workers during the Revolution. Although I must say that railroad workers are still missing from much of the photographic archives I have found. However, Berumen's book is useful because it helps to reconstruct the way the railroad was used during the Revolution. For example, the sabotage of bridges and rails was one of the main activities that rebels used against the railroad. Once Revolutionaries take charge of the railroad the train is used to create camps, and often camps are built on top of railroad cars. In some instances, the railroad is also used as a projectile and, filled with dynamite, they are launched against enemy positions.

Berumen's book contains a large number of photographs that are also useful for the Historical GIS component of my dissertation. These photographs show cities and landscapes as the Revolution took place. For example, the railroad station becomes a very important meeting point during the Revolution since political rallies take place on top of railroad platforms, other times railroad stations become important centers of military activity because the government uses them as storage and camping grounds. But generally, these photographs demonstrate the railroad stations were important centers of activity during the Revolution.

In addition to the access I have to these important archives, being here has also been indispensable since it has allowed me to strengthen my relationships with local researchers. Dr. Laura Espejel at INAH has become a mentor and advocate of my work. Recently she invited me to speak with her at a roundtable of researchers at the National Railroad Museum that will take place next year. She has also introduced me to many other researchers, most notably Pedro Salmerón, one of the most well-known historians of the Mexican Revolution. I hope to continue meeting with Professor Salmerón and to recruit him to as an outside reader for my dissertation in the coming months.

Lastly, I would like to add that the short-term objectives of my project have been achieved. 1. Moving to Mexico City and establishing a home base for my research; 2. Working on the Oral History Archive and specialized libraries; and 3. Strengthening my professional networks with local researchers and academics. Therefore, by completing these short-term objectives, the monies from the CLAG Field Study Award have placed me in a good position to continue with the long-term objectives of my project.