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**NOT A SWEET DEAL: MEXICAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE SUGAR BEET
FARMS OF THE MIDWEST AND MOUNTAIN STATES, 1900-1930**

By

Camila Montoya

**A THESIS
Submitted to
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Professor Peter M. Beattie

ABSTRACT

NOT A SWEET DEAL: MEXICAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE SUGAR BEET FARMS OF THE MIDWEST AND MOUNTAIN STATES, 1900-1930

By

Camila Montoya

During the 1900-1930 period, hundreds of thousands of Mexican farm laborers in Texas migrated every year to work in the sugar beet fields of the Great Lakes, Mountain and Plain states. Current historical literature explains that the Mexicans traveled north to escape the racial discrimination they experienced in the Lone Star state and to take advantage of the higher wages and better conditions offered by the beet growers. The findings of this research indicate however, that the wages paid to Mexican agricultural migrant workers in the beet fields, and their net earnings, were not significantly higher than those paid by Texas cotton ranchers and vegetable farmers. Here, as well as in the sugar beet farms, Mexican migrant laborers suffered considerable wage, racial and social discrimination. I argue instead that surplus labor in the US Southwest, a high demand for unskilled labor in the sugar beet industry and the lure of higher paying factory jobs in the industrial cities of the Midwest drove the labor migration stream to the North.

This study utilizes the reports of George T. Edson, an investigator from the Labor Bureau of Statistics who in 1926-27 surveyed the Mexican workers in beet fields and their employers, as its main primary sources. It contributes to the history of Mexican labor in the United States during the early 1900's by focusing on the sugar beet farms in the northern states, which have received relatively little attention from historians. Most research on Mexican migrant agricultural workers during the 1900-1930 period has concentrated on California and on the US Southwest. This study also shows how the employers in the sugar beet districts, like their counterparts in the Texas cotton belt, built their practices of wage, job and social discrimination utilizing ethnic stereotypes that categorized the laborers as inferior and their back breaking work as "Mexican labor".

To my husband, Andrew

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following refer to George T. Edson's summary reports to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These documents are housed today in the Paul S. Taylor Collection at the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley.

- CW "Mexicans in Sugar Beet Work in the Central West", 1927. Covers Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and Kansas.
- DET "Mexicans in Detroit, Michigan", 1926.
- FLINT "Mexicans in Flint, Michigan", 1926.
- FR Edson's field reports, 1926 and 1927.
- NCS "Mexicans in Our North Central States", 1927. Covers area from Allegheny Mountains to the Missouri River, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.
- NOR "Northern Sugar Beet Mexicans", 1927. Report on North Dakota, Minnesota and northern Iowa.
- PONT "Mexicans in Pontiac, Michigan", 1926.
- PTC Paul S. Taylor Collection at the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant farm laborers traveled every year, in the early spring, from the US Southwest to the sugar beet fields of the Great Lakes and northern Plain and Mountain states, where they toiled the soil until the late fall. The historical literature explains that the workers embarked on this annual trek to the North to take advantage of the better wages and living conditions in the beet farms and to avoid the virulent racial discrimination to which they were subjected in the Southwest, particularly in Texas. However, a close analysis of the daily lives and labor of the beet farm hands shows that the nature of their work, earnings and standard of living in the North were not too dissimilar from those they encountered in the Lone Star state. Mexican migrant laborers found similar prejudice and social, occupational and wage discrimination in Texas cotton ranches and in northern sugar beet farms. This study shows that the migrants traveled North every year driven by conditions of surplus labor in Texas, a large demand for unskilled labor in the sugar beet business and by the possibility of finding more permanent and higher paying employment in the industrial urban centers of the upper Midwest.

The subject of this study reflects my interest in the history of Mexico and labor. Relatively little historical research has been conducted with specific focus on Mexican agricultural workers in the sugar beet, fruit and vegetable farms of the upper Midwest and Plain states during the 1900-1930 period. This is regrettable because commercial agriculture was the single largest employer of Mexican labor in the United States at the time and the sugar beet industry employed more Mexicans than any other economic sector in the northern half of the US. Some historical accounts include these laborers as a point of departure for an analysis of the experience of Mexican migrant workers in fields

and factories in subsequent decades. In these studies, the *betabeleros* of the 1900-1930 period are simply a minor part of the cast of a larger story. This is the case of Dennis N. Valdes' history of the Mexican people in Michigan and Detroit from 1900 to 1976, and of his more recent study of Mexican agricultural workers in the Great Lakes region from 1917 to 1970.¹ Similarly, Carey McWilliams' survey of the history of Spanish speaking people in the United States and Rodolfo Acuna's account of the history of Chicanos give rather brief consideration to the sugar beet workers.² Otey Scruggs' study of Mexican agricultural workers in America centers on the period 1942-1954, though it includes a general overview of the preceding four decades.³ Mark Reisler's history of the Mexican immigrant labor in the United States during the first decades of the 1900's provides a comprehensive analysis of the economic reasons that drove the movements of large number of Mexican workers across the international border and the American legislation that facilitated it.⁴ Some scholars see the Mexican presence in the beet farms of the Midwest in the early part of the twentieth century primarily in terms of the support it gave to Mexicans in the industrial urban centers. Valdes argues that, "...the importance of the sugar beet industry in the Midwest can be illustrated in comparison with their compatriots farther east... Without an agricultural base to provide jobs during difficult times, Mexican settlements in the East Coast disappeared early in the years of the Great Depression... [But] in the Midwest, the beet fields offered [the Mexicans] employment during hard times in the city".⁵ A detailed analysis of the labor relations that governed the work in the sugar beet fields and of the living conditions of the Mexicans who toiled in the beet farms is lacking in the literature.

More recent historical literature has also generally focused on other aspects of the work experience of Mexican migrant workers in the United States. In 1993, Zaragoza Vargas published his account of Mexican industrial workers in Detroit and the Midwest from the first World War to the onset of the Great Depression.⁶ Vargas' analysis is important because it interprets the migration of Mexican workers to the industrial centers

of the Midwest as an integral part of the larger migratory stream that flowed from Mexico to the US Southwest, and from there to the farms of the northern tier American states. The study shows how Mexican migrant laborers moved from beet farm to factory work and back to the sugar beet fields, depending on labor demand and economic conditions. But of course, Vargas' emphasis lies on the Mexican industrial worker.

In contrast to the scant literature on Mexican beet labor, a larger amount of historical research has addressed the experience of the Mexican migrant in farms in the US Southwest and in California in the 1900-1930 period.⁷ Most of these studies agree that racial stereotypes of the Mexican workers played a key role in shaping the labor relations in the farms of the Southwest and the social and wage discrimination inflicted on the laborers. This discrimination was pervasive and truly virulent in Texas. Thus, it has generally been assumed by historians of Mexican labor that the farm hands who migrated to the northern states to work in the sugar beet fields did so to improve on what indeed were harsh working and living conditions, under considerable racial discrimination, in the Lone Star state.⁸ However, a closer examination of the life and work of the Mexicans in the sugar beet farms shows that they did not represent a significant improvement to the laborers.

My examination of the living and working conditions of the *betabeleros*, as the Mexican migrants in the beet farms were known, is primarily based on the unpublished reports of George T. Edson, a field investigator for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1926, the Bureau assigned Edson the task to ascertain the status of the Mexicans living in the northcentral United States, an area defined for official purposes as extending from Pittsburgh to Nebraska. This was not the first time that the Federal Government had ordered an investigation of the conditions of imported Mexican labor in the United States. The Department of Labor had conducted several inquiries since 1920, after the war, when organized labor and other groups began to show skepticism about further need for foreign workers.⁹ Southwestern farmers insisted at the time however, that a shortage

of farm workers still existed. A special committee, appointed in 1920 by the Secretary of Labor to investigate these complaints against the temporary admission of foreign agricultural workers, had recommended that Mexican farm labor continue to be imported. Thus, the exemption of Mexican laborers from the immigration restrictions imposed by Congress in 1885 and 1917 continued through 1922.¹⁰ In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson Immigration Act, which placed specific caps on the number of immigrants from individual countries. Mexico was not included in this legislation, but the debate between farmers and organized labor, which sided with other restrictionist groups, over the need to continue to import Mexican workers, persisted. Practically every year, from 1920 to 1930, bills designed to restrict the migration of Mexicans to the United States were introduced in Congress, though none came to a vote in either House.¹¹ Edson's field studies of 1926 and 1927 were the product of these controversies. He was one of several investigators charged to report on the status of the Mexican workers and on the need that their employers had for their labor. Upon the completion of his inquiry, Edson sent summary reports to his superiors in Washington D.C., informing them that throughout the northcentral United States, sugar beet growers and sugar manufacturers depended on the Mexican workers for their economic viability. Moreover, Edson asserted that neither Anglo-Saxon Americans nor European immigrants, only the Mexicans, would willingly perform the strenuous beet farm work.¹² Unimpeded by Congressional caps on Mexican immigration, beet farmers continued to utilize Mexican laborers in their fields throughout the rest of the 1920's.

In his travels during 1926 and 1927, Edson paid special attention to Mexican workers in sugar beet farms and city factories. He interviewed employers and workers and he also visited Mexican communities - referred to as colonies at the time- in towns and in the farm fields. Edson's extensive, unpublished reports constitute the main primary source for the analysis that follows. I have also utilized some reports on the conditions in the beet farms commissioned by the state of Michigan in the 1940's.

Edson's reports proved quite valuable because of their considerable detail and their attention to the nature of the work and the living conditions of the workers, as well as to the variety of contractual arrangements and wage levels prevalent in the extensive territory covered. However, the reports provide a wealth of information about the Mexicans and their employers but do not give an unfiltered voice to the workers. Finding this voice will be the focus of future research.

In the meantime, with the information at hand and to introduce the laborers in a more personal way, I have reconstructed what might have been a typical Mexican family working in the beet fields of the Midwest in the late 1920's. Chapter 1 provides a brief, composite account of this family's immigration into the United States, its work in the cotton farms of Texas and its migration to a Michigan beet farm. It is based on a careful sifting of data found in Edson's reports and in the historical literature. Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the foundations of my study with an analysis of employers and workers in the beet districts, the labor relations they negotiated, on paper, and in everyday practice, and the resulting living conditions of the Mexicans. Chapter 4 compares the conditions of the Mexican agricultural laborers in Texas with those in the northern sugar beet fields. It also provides an interpretative analysis of the results of this comparison, namely that the economic and social conditions that the migrants experienced in both settings were similar. The study's conclusion ponders the implications of my argument for the historiography of Chicanos, American labor, immigration and ethnicity, placing it in a broad context and a variety of fields.

CHAPTER 1

IN THE SUGAR BEET FIELDS

What follows is a composite picture of the Mexican migrant workers in the beet fields, based on statistically probable traits that observers found among the laborers. In his survey of the sugar beet farms, George Edson recorded a variety of facts about the Mexicans, including their average ages, family organization, living arrangements in the farms, places of origin, both in Mexico and in the American Southwest, daily diet, and the laborers' experiences with hiring agents and with the town folks of the beet districts. This chapter presents an aggregate of these data, along with observations that scholars of Mexican agricultural labor in Texas and in the Midwest have reported in the extant literature.¹

On a warm and sunny day in early June, 1927, in one of his visits to the beet farms in Michigan, Edson would have seen countless number of acres of neatly arranged rows, where the green sugar beet plants had just begun to sprout. He would have noticed groups of workers here and there, moving slowly, but steadily, along the individual rows of plants. Coming closer, the Department of Labor surveyor would have observed a gang of eight workers, three men in their late twenties or early thirties, a couple of women the same age and three children, eight to ten years old. Each worker moved in an almost rhythmic pattern, repeatedly bending down, cutting some of the small seedlings with a hoe, throwing the cuttings aside, along his path, and then straightening up, moving forward and bending over again by the next beet plant. With their hands, the laborers were uprooting the weaker plants within each green cluster, leaving a single strong beet seedling in place. The men, women and children were blocking and thinning the beets, reducing the number of plants and leaving clusters of beet seedlings ten or so inches apart.²

Approaching the workers, Edson would have soon concluded that they were Mexicans. In spite of the dirt and sweat that covered their faces, hands and clothes, the

color of their skin and facial features were still distinguishable and they spoke Spanish. Besides, having spent already a year surveying farming agriculture in the Midwest, Edson knew perfectly well that beet farm work was “Mexican work”.³ With the help of one of the men who spoke some broken English, the observer would have learned that, like many Mexican beet farm hands, the gang of laborers was an extended family consisting of two couples, Jose and Rosa, their cousins Florencio and Esperanza, their three children and Evaristo, Jose’s single brother.⁴ They were Mexicans, from Michoacan, and had just come from San Antonio, Texas, in late May, piled up on a stake-bed truck, in an exhausting and seemingly endless journey, the eight of them and the four large bundles containing all their possessions.⁵ They had started to work right away, as soon as they arrived in the farm, because the beet farmer had taken advantage of the early spring and had drilled the ground and planted the seeds in mid May.

During his visit, the Labor Department investigator would have learned that these men, women and children had been performing the blocking operation on the beet rows for eight or nine hours a day, six, sometimes seven days a week, for four weeks, constantly bending, kneeling and straightening up. Evaristo would have explained that on that day, the family had almost completed blocking and thinning their assigned 30 acres.⁶ Only two more acres remained. Then, they would start again, working every acre, this time to get rid of the weeds brought out by the spring rains and already sprouting in the fields. Kneeling and bending, they would pull out the weeds, with hoes or with their bare hands, every day through July or perhaps early August, to allow the beet plants to grow strong and large. Only then could the family take some time off the beet fields, perhaps for three to four weeks, until the harvest time, in late September or early October. This time off was hard for the family though, because they would not receive any pay for it. Jose, Florencio and Evaristo planned to search for temporary jobs in nearby onion and corn farms, but they knew they could not move very far because the beet harvest had to

be done on time, or the sugar in the beets would spoil and the grower would cut their pay.⁷

Harvesting the beets was hard work. The entire family was needed, from sun up to sun down, to ensure timely harvesting of the product. The farmer would pull the mature beets out of the ground with a mechanical plower, while the family, on foot, would follow behind, bending over each plant left on the ground by the plower, shaking off the loose dirt from the beets, removing the tops with topping knives and throwing the harvested product into piles. The farmer was responsible for transporting the beets to the sugar factory. By late November, Jose would have explained, their beet season contract would be over. In response to Edson's questions, the men would have acknowledged that beet farm labor was hard, long, difficult and tiring work. For Rosa and Esperanza, the back breaking work on the beet rows was also hard, but there was more waiting for them. Long and arduous hours of continued labor waited for them at the end of every day, when they returned to their homes from the fields. The women did the washing, cleaning and cooking for the entire family, mostly during the evening, while the men rested for a while.⁸

Judging by the comments he frequently made in his reports to his superiors, Edson would have found the living conditions of these Mexican migrants appalling. The eight member family lived in a two room shack, 20 by 22 feet, one in a row of ten similar structures built by the beet farmer in a corner of his property. A single door led to the first room, which contained a coal stove, a small table and some wooden crates that served as chairs. Pots and pans hung over the stove and there were a couple of what appeared to be large sacks of flour and beans in a corner, along with a small bed. A straw mat was rolled on another corner. A single, small window let some light in the room and several used candles on the table attested to the lack of electricity. A thin partition separated these living quarters with the second room, windowless and only 8 by 20 feet, where two narrow cots were set against the walls. An image of the Virgin of Guadalupe

hung on the far wall, along with a rosary. An old and worn out valise completed the room's furnishings.⁹

The family had no running water in their house and Rosa and Esperanza, with the help of the older children, had to bring the water needed for washing, drinking and cooking from the single water hand pump provided by the farmer for all his workers. The pump was located about two blocks from the women's home. Rosa, Esperanza and their family shared a single privy, placed a few yards behind their small cottage, with other four worker families.¹⁰

Families shared other things too. The women helped each other with child care. The younger women, perhaps only fourteen or fifteen years old would often stay home during the day, with the small children, while everyone else, including the older boys and girls, worked on the fields.¹¹ One of the men owned an old, dilapidated car and in it, on special occasions, perhaps a Sunday afternoon, the men would visit the nearest town, fifteen miles down the road, to play some pool or to buy food, matches, candles and other supplies their families may have needed. Sometimes, on a week day, one of the men would travel to the nearest bank to send some of their hard earned money to the dependent relatives he had left in Texas, or even Mexico.¹²

The workers' visits to the town were infrequent however, because free time was rare. Jose, Florencio and Evaristo knew they were paid by the acre and they had extended themselves and the entire family contracting for a total of 30 acres. Like most gangs of beet laborers in the region, the whole family would have to labor during the entire beet season to complete the assignment. But the Mexicans visited the nearby town infrequently for other reasons. City folk did not always welcome the Mexicans, but frowned upon them in city parks, public picnics, barber shops, restaurants and stores. Just the other day, in Saginaw, Jose and Evaristo had rescued a fellow *betabelero* from a beating at the hands of several town folks, who attacked him because he was a "damned

Mexican".¹³ Nor could the laborers afford tickets to the movie houses and town theaters.¹⁴

If their experience was common to most migrants, Jose and Florencio would have made contact in Mexico with a *coyote*, a smuggler of illegal workers who promised to take them to Texas for a fee. After traveling to the Mexican border by train, each immigrant would have probably paid \$15 to the smuggler. The laborers would have explained to Edson that they had entered the United States near Laredo. Once in Texas, the Mexicans had been handed over to an *enganchador*, or labor agent, who extracted an additional \$1.50 apiece to take them to a cotton farm west of San Antonio. Florencio and Jose knew that the profits in the labor smuggling racket were significant because the *enganchador* also received about \$5 per worker from the Texas farmer, upon delivery of the workers.¹⁵

Jose and Florencio had traveled by train and truck to the cotton farm. Upon arrival, their employer had announced, through an interpreter, that the cost of transportation from the border, as well as the employment agent's fees, would be extracted from their first week's wages.¹⁶ Without money or transportation back to their home towns, or to the border, most workers had no choice but to acquiesce. Besides, they were well aware that the cotton farmer could keep them under strict surveillance and force them to work in the fields until they had earned what he claimed they owed him.¹⁷ With plenty of Mexicans crossing the border every day, the farmer could turn any recalcitrant worker over to the Border Patrol, which would deport them back to Mexico. Jose and Florencio had felt trapped, but they were now in the United States and they had a job, after long months of unemployment in Mexico.

Like most cotton farm hands in Texas in the 1920's, Florencio and Jose made \$0.80 per day, harvesting cotton.¹⁸ After the season, they had worked in a couple of vegetable farms and had done odd jobs in San Antonio. But finding a steady job was becoming increasingly hard, because there were plenty of idle workers throughout the

Rio Grande Valley.¹⁹ Jose and Florencio were eager to make enough money to bring their wives, whom they had left in Michoacan. A year ago in April, they had heard a labor agent from the American Sugar Beet Company speak in their *barrio*, in San Antonio. He had offered \$23 per acre to any Mexican worker willing to sign a season contract, along with transportation and housing in the Michigan beet fields. Jose and Florencio had signed up, each for a total of 7 acres.²⁰ It had worked out quite well for them. The immigrants had labored in Michigan from late May till the end of November, when they returned to Texas, in time to earn some additional money picking vegetables during the first four months of this year. By then, they had been able to pay the cost of bringing their wives, the three children and Evaristo. In May, the family had come back to Michigan, this time under a contract with the Michigan Sugar Company.

Had other observers surveyed the beet fields of Michigan in subsequent years, they would have noted that Jose, Florencio, Evaristo and the rest of the family returned to the state's beet farms for the next few seasons. They would have also noted that at the end of the 1931 season, before the group embarked on their usual migratory journey back to Texas, the Mexicans had been rounded up by Michigan state authorities and forcibly placed in specially chartered trains that took them, along with hundreds of other undocumented workers, back to Mexico. The family was among the first of the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans in the United States, legal and illegal immigrants, who would eventually be involuntarily repatriated during the Great Depression.²¹ Perhaps some visitor of the beet districts in the 1930's would wonder why, of all immigrant groups in America, were Mexicans the only ones targeted for deportation in those years?

CHAPTER 2

THE EMPLOYERS: BEET GROWERS AND SUGAR COMPANIES

The scholarly literature explains that Mexican agricultural workers migrated from Texas to the beet farms of the northern states to take advantage of the better working and living conditions available in the North and to escape the harsh discrimination they consistently experienced in Texas.¹ I argue however, that during the 1910's and 1920's, these Mexican migrant laborers did not travel every spring season to the sugar beet farms because the working and living conditions they encountered there were substantially better than those in Texas cotton ranches and vegetable farms. Instead, three factors drove the migrant stream North: Surplus labor in Texas, a large demand for unskilled labor in the sugar beet industry and the possibility for the Mexican workers, however remote for most of them, of finding more permanent and higher paying employment in the foundries, meat packing houses, construction and car companies of the North.

My thesis rests on this study's findings that the wages paid to Mexican agricultural workers in the beet fields and the ability of their earnings to cover the migrants' cost of living were only slightly higher than those of Mexican laborers in the Texas cotton belt. It also derives from a comparison of the quality of life of the two groups, which shows that, in both Texas and the northern states, Mexicans experienced similar and considerable prejudice and social, wage and occupational discrimination. To begin the analysis, this chapter will examine the sugar beet industry and the ways in which the employers, the sugar refineries and the beet growers, shaped their labor relations and maintained a steady supply of farm hands with the single purpose of maximizing their enterprises' profits.

After the 1897 Dingley Tariff, the sugar beet industry experienced a tremendous expansion in the United States. In 1897, in response to lobbying pressure from farmers, Congress passed the Dingley Tariff, which placed the extraordinarily high duty of 78.87 per cent on imported sugar and consequently created a sugar beet boom in the Midwest,

and northern Plain and Mountain states. Sugar beet companies quadrupled between 1900 and 1907.² After the passage of the Dingley Tariff, the acreage dedicated to the cultivation of beets in the Pacific Coast, Rocky Mountain and Great Lakes states multiplied to almost 600,000 acres by 1919.³ Beet farms had developed by then over the large region that extended from Montana to Pennsylvania. Manufacturers of sugar from beets represented one of the most protected segments of American agriculture at the time. In addition to the benefit from the tariff, they received tax exemptions and subsidies from the states. The sugar beet producers also actively and successfully lobbied the Federal Government to relax the immigration restrictions on Mexican farm laborers, upon whom they had grown quite dependent.

The industry was organized around the needs of the sugar producing factories. Logistically, sugar refining facilities were located in the districts where the beets were grown, because the beets suffered significant loss of sugar content if left stacked in the fields for extended periods, or if submitted to long hauls after the harvest. A few, very large companies, particularly the American Beet, Great Western, Ohio, Michigan and National Sugar Companies, dominated the industry. Leveraging their size and cohesive organization, these sugar manufacturers managed and controlled the basic relationships within the industry, that is, the relationships between the refineries and their suppliers, the growers, and between the companies and the farm hands. The sugar producers maintained this control through a system of dual contracts with both growers and workers.

In its contractual agreement with individual farmers, the refinery determined the number of acres to be planted, designated the specific fields to be cultivated and purchased the crop in advance of the season. The price paid to the grower ranged from \$6 to \$8 per ton of beets and was calculated from previous crop yields, sugar content of the beets and the current wholesale price of sugar.⁴ The company thus advanced to the growers the money necessary to get the crop started. Throughout the growing season, the

sugar manufacturer sent representatives to supervise the field operations, dictating the methods to be practiced in the cultivation of the beets. The company also agreed to furnish the farmer the necessary labor.

For their part, the growers agreed to prepare the ground, drill the seeds, cultivate and irrigate the fields and haul the beets to the refinery. They were also responsible for providing housing for the workers and for transporting them and their luggage to and from the nearest railway station. Farm hands received their wages directly from the refineries or from the growers, but in both cases the farmers carried the labor expenses. The contracts and controls imposed by the sugar companies did not constitute a happy arrangement for the growers who often complained about them. Their gross income averaged \$60 to \$70 per acre, per year, but the beet farmers claimed that their operating costs, which included wages, the laborers' housing, local transportation of the workforce, seeds, maintenance of tools and equipment and transportation of the harvested crop, were too high.⁵ Under these circumstances, and because the sugar company took responsibility for supplying all the needed labor, the farmer had no incentive to invest in good housing or to ensure better working conditions for the workers, even if this meant better worker retention until the harvest. As the next chapter shows, growers in fact made minimal provisions for the well being and comfort of their laborers. Farmers provided their workers with small, squalid shacks and huts, without electricity, running water or much ventilation and with only straw mattresses and a wood stove for furniture. Some Mexican migrant farm hands lived in abandoned boxcars during the beet season.⁶

Growers knew that the cultivation of sugar beets was a labor intensive operation. They were keenly aware that this "stoop" labor was also seasonal and depended on the availability of a good number of workers at harvest time because of the perishable nature of the crop. The beets had to be harvested and processed quickly after maturity to minimize the loss of sugar content. Farmers therefore consistently tried to encourage as many workers as possible to enter the harvest labor market, which sometimes resulted in

underemployment and low wages for the farm hands during the beet season. But even more difficult for the workers were the winter months, after the completion of the beet harvest, when the laborers experienced real unemployment and deprivation. Outside of the farming season, temporary or permanent jobs for unskilled workers were very scarce in both towns and farms of the beet districts.

The seasonality, physical demands and low pay that characterized the labor performed in the beet farms made most Americans avoid this kind of work. Therefore, sugar companies and beet growers came to rely on ethnic minorities such as eastern Europeans, Blacks, some native Americans and increasingly after 1900, on Mexicans. Up until the 1910's, the bulk of the sugar beet labor in the Rocky Mountain and Great Lakes states was supplied by immigrants from eastern Europe. By then however, the upward mobility of Russian and German immigrants many of whom had become farm owners, restrictions placed on European immigration into the US, and increased availability of Mexican labor, opened up opportunities for the latter.

This increased supply of Mexican labor resulted from a number of different factors. First, the economic development of the United States Southwest, which had rapidly expanded since the last decades of the 1800's created a significant labor demand and a steady stream of Mexican workers that flowed across the international border in the first decades of the 1900's. The movement of these immigrants was greatly facilitated by the new railroads that now connected central and northern Mexico directly with the United States. This vast new network of Mexican tracks was part of the significant economic expansion and industrialization accomplished by northern Mexico during the first two decades of the presidency of Porfirio Diaz, which lasted from 1876 till 1910.

Mexico's economic expansion during the Porfiriato also acted as a force that pushed the labor migration stream across the border to the US Southwest. Under Diaz, massive expropriation of Indian corporate and village communal lands accompanied the large expansion of Mexico's commercial export agriculture. By 1910, ninety percent of

the Mexican *campesino* population had no land.⁷ This landless peasantry, not easily absorbed by the industrial sector, also suffered periodic famine, as a result of droughts, irrigation shortfalls and steadily rising prices of staple foods, caused by the dedication of most arable lands to export commercial crops such as cotton, sugar, coffee and henequen. Between 1907 and 1910, Mexico imported 200,000 tons of corn per year.⁸ By the 1890's, many of the dispossessed peasants had become migrant laborers in Mexico itself, working as temporary peons on the large estates, or in the mines. Many others immigrated to the United States Southwest.

By the early 1900's, Mexican industrial workers joined these agricultural laborers in their migration to the United States. Facing the severe recession that rocked the Mexican economy in the first decade of the twentieth century, the foreign owners of Mexico's industry shut down a large number of their facilities in the country. Thousands of Mexican workers in mines, smelting, timber, textiles and oil producing operations were laid off, or experienced significant loss of wages in real and nominal terms. Many sought relief to their plight by migrating north to the US Southwest.⁹ The violence and political and economic turmoil that accompanied the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution, and its aftermath in the 1920's, further pushed hundreds of thousands of laborers from Mexico to the United States during those years.¹⁰ In the decade of the 1920's the number of immigrants peaked at approximately 500,000 legal entries, plus thousands of others who entered the US illegally.¹¹

One can visualize the dynamics of the immigration process of Mexican labor to the United States in the 1900-1930 period as governed by a combination of forces that pushed and pulled the labor stream north. Powerful political and economic factors that characterized Porfirian, revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico pushed hundreds of thousands of laborers across the international frontier. At the same time, the growth experienced by commercial agriculture and mining in the US Southwest increased the demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labor and pulled Mexican workers north, like a

magnet. The same demand in labor intensive commercial crops in the North, and to a lesser extent in its industrial centers, caused a significant number of Mexican immigrants to continue their journey to the sugar beet fields and factories of the northern states. Here, demand for Mexican labor grew considerably as a result of the restrictions on European immigration set in place during the first World War. The trek to the beet farms was greatly facilitated by the oversupply of unskilled Mexican labor that had developed by the late 1910's and 1920's in parts of the US Southwest, particularly in Texas, as a result of the steady international immigration process. Evidence of the labor oversupply in the Lone Star state is provided by the fact that in those years, thousands of Black sharecroppers, wage farm laborers and railway construction workers left Texas to go north. Displaced by the steady flow of Mexican immigrants, many of these Blacks migrated to the growing industrial cities of the East Coast and upper Midwest. Often, they traveled in the same trains that carried equally displaced Mexican farm laborers from Texas to the northern sugar beet farms.¹²

The possibility of settling in urban centers and securing more permanent jobs in the factories also pushed Mexican immigrants to move North. The rapid industrialization of the northern states during the first decades of the twentieth century increased the demand for unskilled and low skilled labor, at a time when immigration from Europe became more restricted. As a result, a good number of Mexican immigrants secured urban jobs in factories.¹³ Some lived in the cities for short periods of time and after the completion of their temporary jobs joined the migratory stream back to the US Southwest. However, the unskilled labor demand in the factories could not accommodate but a fraction of the Mexican migrant workers in the United States in the early 1900's. The majority of these laborers remained in agricultural jobs. George Edson estimated that a total of 8,000 to 10,000 Mexicans lived in Detroit in 1926.¹⁴ From the end of World War I to the first years of the Great Depression, about 58,000 Mexicans settled in the cities of the Midwest. In contrast, Edson calculated that approximately 145,000 Mexicans

labored in the sugar beet fields of the Great Lakes, Mountain and Plain states in 1926 alone.¹⁵

Thus, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, there was a large and growing pool of Mexican labor in the United States. Sugar beet production became the single largest employer of these Mexican immigrants in the North. Only railroad construction and maintenance came close to the beet industry in terms of migrants employed. During the growing season of 1926, the total number of Mexican sugar beet workers reportedly ranged from 65 to 80 thousand and in some individual regions they constituted 75 to 95 per cent of the work force in the farms.¹⁶ The number of Mexican laborers was hard to define with absolute certainty however, because many of them constantly drifted from one sugar district to another, in search of even slightly better wages. But, as one sugar company official boasted in 1927, "... in Kansas, Colorado and Wyoming, ...beet work has come to be regarded as a Mexican's privilege and duty..."¹⁷ Identifying beet farming with Mexican labor, employers confined the migrants to this most physically demanding, repetitive and low paying occupation.

Because beet farmers paid a fixed amount per acre, they assigned their workers a given number of acres at the beginning of the season. An adult male farm hand typically handled an average of 7 to 9 acres in a season and a maximum of 15. The weather of course affected the workers' output, because a rainy season could bring an extra amount of weeds that had to be pulled out by hand. With wages calculated on a per acre rate, beet farm labor was specially suited for families and groups. Edson reported that in 1926 in the Midwest, the proportion of adult Mexican male workers to women and children was approximately one to two. Though a number of migrants traveled alone, a significant number of families migrated and worked together. A migrant family consisting of husband, wife and children working in Ohio, Michigan or Minnesota in the 1926 and 1927 seasons typically tended 15 to 20 acres of beets.¹⁸

As the dominant enterprise in the industry, the sugar refineries not only negotiated agreements with the growers advantageous to the company, but also established equally favorable contracts with individual workers. These contracts stipulated wages and transportation to the beet district. Because the sugar refineries supplied all labor requirements to the farmers, they often had large Labor Departments. Their recruiters maintained contact with the workers, labor leaders and hiring agents in Texas and other parts of the Southwest, from which most Mexican beet workers came. To hire the required number of farm hands, the sugar companies covered an extensive territory. Company men traveled to the US Southwest in the early spring to begin their recruitment operations. The largest proportion of Mexican laborers in the Great Lakes region came from San Antonio and Fort Worth, while those in the western states were hired primarily in El Paso, Albuquerque and even Phoenix. But by the 1920's, company recruiting agents also visited cities like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Kansas City and other centers that had developed by then a significant Mexican population. Close to 80 per cent of the Mexicans over 20 years of age who worked in the beet fields in South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska during the 1926 season had been born in Mexico, though many had been in the United States for 10 or even 20 years.¹⁹ The large majority of these immigrants had come from the central Mexican states of Michoacan, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Aguascalientes and Zacatecas, though some had also originated in the northeastern states of San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon and Coahuila.²⁰

The sugar company also recruited through labor agents in Texas, to whom they paid \$2 for each man hired and \$1 for every woman or child over 14 years of age. In the early spring, between April 10 and May 1, the refinery chartered special passenger trains that carried the Mexican migrants from major recruitment centers, such as San Antonio and Fort Worth, to the various beet districts of the North.²¹ Several of the companies provided the workers transportation from their place of origin to the railway station nearest the beet farms, free of charge, but only if the laborers finished their full contract

for the season. Poor living and working conditions in the beet fields prompted many migrants to leave their assigned farms, even before the harvest, to seek better wages in other districts. How to keep their workers through the end of the season was a common concern of farmers and refineries. The employers also worried about the migrants not returning to the beet fields the following spring. To entice the farm hands to stay in the area after the harvest and to save transportation costs, the sugar manufacturers uniformly did not provide the Mexicans a return trip to Texas or other places of origin. Instead, the companies obtained from the railways special rates of two thirds the regular fares, which the laborers could buy if they traveled in groups of ten or more.²² Very few workers took advantage of these fares however, because even the reduced fares were too expensive for their poor earnings. The refineries also paid \$1 per acre more to locally hired Mexicans, or gave them the equivalent of their one way railroad fare, if they came by truck or automobile, a mode of transportation that had become more prevalent in the 1920's. Clearly, the arrangements the sugar refineries made regarding the transportation of the workers reflected the interests of the companies, not those of the migrants.

The sugar companies uniformly set wages on a per acre basis. In most of the beet growing states the better remunerated Mexican migrant workers received \$23 or \$24 per acre, which for an average of 8 acres per worker totaled \$ 184 for an adult male, at the end of a 180 days long season.²³ The migrants actually worked only 60 to 80 of those days, so a quick calculation would show that their daily wages ranged from \$2.30 to \$3.06, or varied from \$0.23 per hour to \$0.30 per hour, for a 10 hours day. In reality however, Mexican beet farm hands received compensation at rates considerably lower than these. The laborers lacked the freedom of movement to secure any but a few, short odd jobs in the farms near their contract location during the season's idle periods. Unless they broke off their contracts with the sugar companies, the migrants were tied to their individually assigned or adjacent farms, for the duration of the beet season. Their relative isolation and the timing of the various tasks required in the beet fields made it impossible

for the migrant workers to absent themselves for long enough periods, or to travel long enough distances to seek additional temporary jobs that would help them stay continuously employed from May to November. Thus, for most adult Mexican beet workers, the \$184 per person received under their contracts represented practically all their earnings over a 180 day season, even if they were idle some of those days.

From the point of view of the laborer, the beet workers' hourly wages ranged from \$0.10 to possibly \$0.15. In either case, whether their earnings are pegged at \$0.10 or \$0.30 per hour, Mexican migrants working for the sugar companies received significantly lower wages compared with those of Mexican unskilled workers employed in the industrial centers in 1926-1927. These laborers averaged \$0.39 per hour in the railroads, \$0.40 per hour in highway and building construction, \$0.43 per hour in meat packing houses, \$0.46 per hour in tanneries and \$0.50 per hour in steel mills and foundries.²⁴ The contracts that the sugar companies offered the Mexican agricultural laborer in the beet farms ensured that he occupied the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder in the North.

Wages and pay schedules, like the transportation arrangements, also reflected the sugar companies' advantage, not the workers' best interest. Employers usually paid their Mexican beet farm workers in three separate installments. After the blocking and thinning of the beet plants, laborers received \$8 per acre. Around August 1, when the final hoeing was completed, the company paid each head of family under contract \$7 per acre. The final payment of \$8 or \$9 per acre was done at the end of the topping operation.²⁵ Manufacturers like The Michigan and Ohio Sugar companies, that did not pay the workers' transportation from Texas to the beet farms, deducted \$ 5 per acre to cover this expense. These employers reduced the first and second payments by \$1.50 per acre and the third by \$2 per acre. Thus, the workers only netted \$18 per acre. (See Figure 1). Attesting to the fact that their pay did not afford them an adequate standard of living, the migrants sometimes broke off their contracts and moved to other farms that

FIGURE 1 EARNINGS IN NORTH CENTRAL STATES DURING 1926 SEASON

Territory	No. Workers	No. Acres	Price/Acre	Earnings	Bonus	Total earned	Avg/person
Michigan	6720	42000	\$23.00	\$966,000	0	\$966,000	\$143.75
Ohio&Ind.	3264	20400	\$23.00	\$469,200	0	\$469,200	\$143.75
Minnesota	1506	9375	\$23.00	\$215,625	\$5,620	\$221,245	\$146.90
N.Dakota	1270	7960	\$24.00	\$191,040	\$2,340	\$193,380	\$152.27
Iowa	2018	12460	\$23.00	\$286,580	\$11,550	\$298,130	\$147.73
TOTALS	14778	92195	\$23.08	\$2,128,445	\$19,510	\$2,147,955	\$145.34

In Michigan five dollars were deducted for transportation, for \$18/acre net.

Total earned is exclusive of any outside earnings.

About 5,000 workers returned to Texas after the harvest was finished.

Source: George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Our North Central States", 1927, PTC, 17.

paid even slightly higher wages. Some traveled to towns in search of more permanent and better jobs and others simply returned to Texas or elsewhere in the Southwest. The sugar beet farmers considered the Mexicans "...likely to drift away during the season when he is offered good wages at other work..."²⁶ Employee retention was a big concern to both growers and sugar refineries.

To keep their labor however, the refineries did not increase the wages or improve the living conditions of the farm hands. Instead they sought to control the workers and to tie them to individual farms, by withholding a portion of the wages throughout the season. In Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota, the companies deducted \$1 per acre from the first and second payments of the season and reimbursed the \$2 per acre only at the completion of the topping. The Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota Company justified these arbitrary deductions and delayed repayment as necessary to recover part of the laborer's transportation cost, which the refinery had agreed to assume, in the event that the worker failed to show up at harvest time.²⁷

Wage rates were far from uniform throughout the region and the workers received their payment either from farmers or in some cases, directly from the sugar company that hired them. In the latter case, the cost of labor was subtracted from the price paid by the sugar manufacturer to the farmer for the harvested beets. Labor costs were always borne by the growers. In the western part of the area surveyed by Edson in 1926 and 1927, compensation to the farm hands varied from \$17 to \$25 per acre. The Garden City Company attached a sliding scale to its contracts, connecting payment rates to the crop yield, calculated in tons of beets produced per acre. (See Figure 2). In the valley of the Arkansas river in western Kansas for example, yields averaged no more than 12 tons per acre during the mid 1920's, and the Mexican migrant workers in this area typically received an average of \$21.50 per acre of beets tended.²⁸ But no matter how hard these workers labored throughout the season, they did not know the exact value of their wages until the end of the harvest, because yields could not be determined until the sugar

FIGURE 2: SLIDING PAY SCALE USED BY THE GARDEN CITY SUGAR COMPANY

YIELD PER ACRE IN TONS.	WAGES FOR THINNING AND HOEING	WAGES FOR TOPPING	TOTAL WAGES
6	\$11.00	\$6.00	\$17.00
7	\$11.25	\$6.50	\$17.75
8	\$11.50	\$7.00	\$18.50
9	\$11.75	\$7.50	\$19.25
10	\$12.00	\$8.00	\$20.00
11	\$12.25	\$8.50	\$20.75
12	\$12.50	\$9.00	\$21.50
13	\$12.75	\$9.50	\$22.25
14	\$13.00	\$10.00	\$23.00
15	\$13.25	\$10.50	\$23.75
16	\$13.50	\$11.00	\$24.50

Settlement for thinning and hoeing was made on the basis of \$11 per acre when the beets were clean. Payment for topping was made on the basis of \$6 per acre until the final tonnage was determined, when the above scale was then applied.

Source: George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Sugar Beet Work in the Arkansas River Valley of Kansas", 1927, PTC, 5.

company actually paid the farmer for the beets. This system of payment no doubt lent itself to abuse of the workers by the combined interests of growers and sugar refineries.

In other areas, the refineries promised the workers a bonus above their contracted rates. Typically, they offered the laborers \$0.75 for every ton of beets produced by the tract of land worked under contract, above an average set or estimated by the company at the time of hiring. The bonus however, was mailed to the workers in the January following the end of the harvest. Before the end of the season, these refineries gave each worker a United States postal card with instructions to fill in his address and mail to the company on January 5. The American Beet Sugar Company claimed that a Mexican family who had tended 48 acres of beets that yielded 15.2 tons per acre received a bonus of \$253.42. But in the same company's districts "...a large number of workers did not receive any bonus..."²⁹ Not only were the earnings of these Mexican migrant laborers tied to the quality of the crop, over which they had no control, but the system of bonus payment by mail made any workers' claims for money owed them extremely difficult, particularly for migrant families who were frequently on the move. Without much command of English, and with little or no reading and writing skills, many Mexican migrant beet workers probably found the postal card system very cumbersome and ineffective. Like the sliding pay scale, the bonus system lent itself to the employers' abuse of the Mexican migrants. During the 1900-1930 period, individual farmers and sugar companies freely manipulated the amount and the mode of payment of their wages, to gain control of their labor and to maximize their profits. Only in the second half of the 1930's did the Federal government make any attempt to secure a uniform minimum wage for Mexican migrant workers in the sugar beet farms.³⁰

It is clear that for the beet sugar manufacturers, the Mexican migrant labor force could be exploited for large profits. The labor departments of the refineries in Wyoming, Colorado and Montana acknowledged in 1926 that the beet sugar industry was absolutely dependent on cheap Mexican labor and "...if their supply is shut off, thousands of acres

now productive would return to cactus and sagebrush”.³¹ The top wage of \$23 or \$24 per acre they paid the Mexicans contrasted sharply with the \$35 per acre the sugar manufacturers and beet growers had been forced to pay eastern Europeans as a result of the labor shortages of the World War years.³² Access to abundant Mexican migrant labor enabled the sugar beet companies to lower their operational costs and to maximize their profits.

Relatively few but large refineries dominated the sugar beet industry in the early 1900's. They enjoyed significant protection from the Federal Government that eliminated their competition from abroad with high import duties and that gave the refineries access to cheap and plentiful labor. Working together as a cohesive group and leveraging their size, capital, and protection, the sugar companies managed to impose onerous contracts on the growers. These contracts left the major risks of production, such as crop size, quality and yield, squarely and exclusively on the farmers' shoulders. In turn, the farmers' unfavorable contract conditions had a negative impact on the Mexican labor force because they left the growers with limited means and no incentive to provide the farm hands with more adequate living and working conditions. Equally detrimental to the migrants, the refineries maintained an overabundance of labor available to the beet growers, by actively and continuously recruiting in the population centers where large number of unskilled and underemployed Mexican workers lived. This more than ample labor supply kept the Mexican migrants' wages depressed, well below the earnings of other unskilled laborers in urban centers. Furthermore, the sugar companies tailored their pay scales to local labor availability and instituted payment terms that tied the workers to the farm, while keeping them in poverty and destitution.

The very low wages and the seasonal nature of sugar beet work combined to keep Mexican migrant agricultural laborers in the North impoverished all year. During the 1900-1930 years, employers kept their wages as low as they could. As George Edson, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' investigator noted, "...the farmer offers wages commensurate

with the supply of labor, always offering as little as he can until his crop begins to rot and then he offers anything".³³ The Mexicans' compensation in the beet fields was inadequate in comparison with the income of industrial wage earners. The next chapter shows that wages were also low because they kept the laborers and their families in squalor and poverty during the beet season and reduced them to destitution without outside assistance or employment during the winter months. The following pages also analyze the major strategies used by the migrant workers in the sugar beet farms to adapt to, and to reshape, the oppressive labor relations set by the sugar companies in cooperation with the growers.

CHAPTER 3

THE WORKERS: "THE DOCILE AND ENDURING MEXICANS"

Mexican migrant workers who toiled in the beet farms tried a number of strategies to survive under the hard living and working conditions imposed by sugar beet companies and farmers. Entire families worked the fields to maximize their income and even children under fourteen performed various tasks, like pulling weeds and thinning out the clusters of young sugar beet seedlings. In the slack periods, the workers sought temporary jobs in towns or nearby farms to complement their earnings. At the end of the beet season, with no demand for their labor in the farms and very limited jobs available in the towns, many Mexican migrants returned to farms in the US Southwest, where they picked cotton, vegetables or citrus fruits. Often, the workers pooled their resources together, sharing a small shed in the winter among two families, or hiring a truck that could move three or four families together, to their next place of employment.

The workers responded to their difficult living and working conditions in even more radical ways. Mexican migrants dissatisfied with individual employers, or with their wages or living arrangements in a beet farm, simply broke off their contracts and moved to another district that offered better pay. As George Edson observed in the beet farms in 1926, "...the Mexican is likely to drift away during the season when he is offered good wages at other work...".¹ Furthermore, as they repeated their annual migrations north from Texas, Mexican beet laborers often did not return to the same farm, nor did they always sign new contracts with the same sugar company. Instead, many came to rely on their own networks of friends and relatives to identify and select their employer every season.²

Many Mexican migrants did some outside farm work during the idle period between the last hoeing and the harvest of the sugar beets. They earned small amounts of additional money making hay, mowing weeds, shocking grain, picking corn and peas, digging potatoes and husking corn. Between late August and the end of September, a

migrant family could earn \$4 a day topping 100 bushels of onions, or the same amount picking 4 tons of sweet corn. Some sugar refineries employed a few Mexican migrants during their idle period, paying them \$3 a day for cleaning out beet dumps, breaking lime rock or sacking and screening coal.³ But everywhere they went, Mexican migrant agricultural workers were given the most menial and taxing jobs and were compensated with the lowest wages compared to other unskilled workers. Even unskilled Black laborers in the northern United States, who had started moving to the industrial centers, made better wages because, as shown in Chapter 2, building construction and factory unskilled workers earned from one third to two thirds higher values than beet farm hands.

The seasonality of the work and the very low wages earned during the beet season made the late fall and winter months particularly long and harsh for the beet laborers. Some simple calculations will show the degree of poverty endured by the Mexicans. To begin with, they faced winter and unemployment with a good portion of the earnings made during the summer and early fall already consumed. While laboring in the beet fields, the migrant workers typically received free housing from the farmer, though housing often amounted to nothing better than sheds, wagons, boxcars or even tents. But the Mexicans had to buy their own food, cooking fuel, clothing, and all other necessities with their meager earnings. In some cases, the sugar companies sold the migrants food items such as 100 pounds sacs of pinto beans, one of which was enough to feed a family of four during a season, at the wholesale price of \$8.50.⁴ Employers also sold coal at cost plus handling charges to the farm hands.

With this and similar data recorded by Edson, it can be estimated that during the beet farming season, a family of four spent a minimum of \$50 to \$70 in meals consisting of a very simple diet of beans, rice, corn, wheat and some vegetables. Adding about \$10 for cooking fuel, \$20 for utensils and \$30 to \$40 for clothing and incidentals, it is possible to assume that the family of wife, husband and two children needed an absolute minimum of \$125, to barely survive in the summer and early fall. Calculating their

earnings at \$345 - \$23 per acre for an estimated 15 acres tended by the two adults- shows that at the end of the beet season, a family of parents and two children was left with less than \$220 on which to live until the following spring.⁵ This amount had to cover transportation to the next place of work, housing, heating, food and clothing for the entire family for a full six months, along with repayment of any loans the laborer might have incurred in to pay his family's travel in Mexico and their passage through the international border. An appreciation of the level of poverty experienced by a Mexican family working in the beet fields and earning \$345 in the mid 1920's could be gained by comparing it with coal mine workers in West Virginia. In 1900, these miners made \$400 per year in family earnings and they struck their employers to improve what many appropriately regarded as intolerably low wages.⁶

For Mexican agricultural laborers, survival during the winter months on what was leftover from the beet season, without at least a temporary job, or charitable assistance, was nearly impossible. But at the end of the beet harvest, many migrant workers could not find employment in the fields or in the urban centers of the North. Jobs in the winter were exceedingly scarce. Besides, the winters of the northern United States made the poverty of the Mexican workers particularly painful, because the migrants could not afford the housing, heating and clothing required in this hard climate. Not surprisingly, between half and two thirds of the Mexican farm hands surveyed by George Edson returned to Texas or to other parts of the Southwest in late November or early December. They followed a circular migration pattern that took them to Texas cotton or vegetable farms, railroad camps or mining towns during the winter and brought them back to the beet fields of the North in the early spring. There was no guarantee however, that the workers would find employment in Texas. The steady flow of Mexican labor into the United States during the 1920's made it often difficult for some of the migrants returning to the Southwest from the northern sugar beet fields to find anything but short term, temporary jobs.

Edson found that about one half of the Mexican beet workers in the Great Lakes region traveled to the border states in November. Most of the other half traveled to cities in the North, looking for jobs in foundries, factories and shops. But Edson noted that a number of these drifted back to Texas anyway, before the spring.⁷ Only a small portion of the Mexican agricultural workers in the Great Lakes states remained in the beet country, where they managed to obtain a little work from farmers or the railroads. In Nebraska, Montana, South Dakota, Colorado, Wyoming and Kansas, 23,000 or approximately two thirds of the 50,000 Mexican migrant farm workers left the region in the late fall. The other third, or 17,000, remained in the towns and farms of the beet territory after the harvest.⁸ In North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota, only 15 per cent of the Mexican farm laborers stayed in the beet areas, while 35 per cent returned to Texas and New Mexico and 50 per cent spent the winter in cities in the Midwest.⁹ A few of the beet workers returned to Mexico at the end of the harvest. A number of factors may have driven the workers South at the end of the season, such as scarcity of work in the farms and limited new demand for unskilled labor in the industrial centers of the North, already supplied by some Mexicans and other ethnic groups that had arrived earlier. The warmer climate of Texas, as well as cultural and family ties in the Southwest may have also attracted the beet laborers to migrate South at the end of November or early December. Some beet farm workers may have returned to Mexico at the end of the season because their migration to the United States had been, from the start, only temporary.

Those laborers that left the northern farm regions to head south to Texas or other parts of the Southwest had to pay their own transportation out of the season's earnings. Relatively few migrants took advantage of the special railroad rates of two thirds the normal fare, negotiated by the sugar companies for the workers' journey back to their points of origin. Even though discounted, these rates of \$20 to \$25 per person were high relative to the migrants' meager earnings.¹⁰ Instead, many of the Mexicans often pooled

their resources together and piled up in old and dilapidated stake-bed trucks or automobiles, in which they traveled to nearby cities or to the Southwest.

But if some beet workers preferred to travel south during the winter, submitting themselves to the harsh and impoverished life of Mexican immigrants in Texas to supplement their incomes, those that remained in the towns and farms of the North experienced no less deprivation, discrimination and isolation. The sugar companies tried to induce many Mexicans to stay in the beet growing districts after the harvest, in company managed or sponsored facilities, often referred to as colonies. These colonies reduced the employer's expense of labor recruitment and transportation. By offering a place to stay over the winter, the refineries also hoped to prevent their experienced workers from going to other companies, a frequent enough occurrence since less than half of the migrants returned to the same fields in consecutive years. To induce the workers to stay, the refineries argued that those who remained in the area during the winter had a better opportunity to become Americanized, accustomed to settled habits and had better chances to educate their children.¹¹

In some cases, the company's policy of providing housing, or "colonizing" Mexicans, responded to public pressure from the surrounding communities. In 1927, the county commissioners of Weld county, Colorado, exasperated by claims for charity by impoverished Mexican families during the winter months, instructed the sheriff to take the migrants to the company, which agreed to take care of them.¹² Sugar manufacturers tried to prevent the Mexicans from attracting public notice by appealing for charity and as Edson noted "...the company would rather pay a family's fare to Mexico than have a howl raised about their pauper Mexicans...".¹³ As landlords and overseers of the workers, the refineries controlled and protected their investment in cheap and productive labor. The employers were in fact deeply involved in the life of the Mexicans, dealing with matters of immigration, language, customs, housing, education and health.

The types of Mexican colonies that sheltered the beet workers during the winter varied with individual companies, but the houses were generally very small, lacked running water and electricity and many were poor dilapidated shanties. Everywhere, overcrowding was the norm. Some employers built adobe houses or flats on a plot of land somewhat removed from an incorporated town and allowed their rent-free use to those workers who promised to remain in beet work in the district. Others demanded some rent from the Mexicans. Some companies advanced credit for fuel and food to the migrants, against their earnings of the following season, which contributed to the indebtedness of many Mexican families who by spring time ... “had nothing coming to them until the fall payment”.¹⁴ In Moorhead, Minnesota, the American Beet Sugar Company supervised through its field man, M. F. Williams, four Mexican families quartered in old houses during the winter. Tragically, the head of the family accommodated in a fifth shanty had died the previous December, asphyxiated with carbon monoxide from an imperfect coal burning stove and the company had sent the other family members back to Mexico.¹⁵ At East Grand Forks, also in Minnesota, the same sugar manufacturer housed some Mexican farm workers in a long shed it had erected at a cost reportedly of a few hundred dollars. Individual rooms in the shed rented to groups or families for \$5 per month.

The sugar manufacturers also built cottages for the migrants at the edge of a town, usually along the railroad tracks. In Alberta Lee, Minnesota, these cottages contained four rooms and each one typically accommodated two Mexican families. A whole cottage rented for \$16 per month, and one half for \$8. The migrants obtained water from outside wells and shared a single water closet among four families. The cottages had no electricity but living near town enabled some to find jobs for a few days at a time. In the colony of Alberta Lee, a few Mexicans worked temporarily at the nearby Wilson meat packing house.¹⁶ In Mason City, Iowa, the sugar company had constructed a long building in their property, two miles north of the town, which it rented to its migrant workers. Euphemistically called Laredo, the building contained ten apartments consisting

of two rooms each. The front room rented for \$5 per month but both rooms in an apartment rented for \$7.50. The company supplied cots and stoves to the workers. The same American Beet Sugar company also rented an old hotel building in the town of Mason City and charged \$10 or \$12 per month to each Mexican family. Of the 17 male adults that Edson reported in this building, two had obtained a job at the Decker meat packing house but the rest were idle, except when called on to do some extra work for the railroads or a nearby brick plant.

Mexican migrant beet workers who spent their winters in northern towns, on their own, outside of the company's patronage, faced equally harsh and squalid living conditions. They generally lived in segregated sections of town, in slum areas separated from the rest of the community. In Minneapolis, the Mexicans lived along the Chicago, Minneapolis & Omaha railroad tracks. From one to four families occupied individual houses that rented for \$15 to \$18 and \$25 per month. In a \$15 house, the lower part would rent for \$8 and the upper level for \$7. Some families occupied two rooms for \$10 a month and even small families crowded sometimes in single rooms rented for \$5.¹⁷ None of the houses visited by Edson had electricity. The migrants obtained water from outdoor city hydrants and several families shared individual outdoor privies. The homes were overcrowded, poorly heated with old stoves and ventilated by poorly fitting old window sashes and doors. At night, these shanties were illuminated with lamps, lanterns and even candles. The furniture consisted of "...stuff that people discarded...", such as boxes that doubled up as chairs, while firewood was piled up in corners, along with sacks of beans and "...unkempt children played on the floor". For Edson, the inside of these houses "reeked with a hundred odors".¹⁸ But he also noted that most of the men were always looking for jobs and some managed to get work for a few days at a time.

In the 1900-1930 period, lack of training and prejudice channeled most of the Mexican laborers who migrated north from Texas and other places in the Southwest into farm labor, a market characterized by extremely low wages. Lack of skills and prejudice

also forced the majority of migrants to remain agricultural workers. Their itinerancy, combined with low income and discrimination, determined the squalid and destitute conditions in which the migrants lived.

In 1927, George Edson and some of his contemporaries characterized the Mexicans as possessing "...docility and endurance, [being] content to work only a few months in the year and accept humbly what conditions fate and their employer may decree...".¹⁹ Far from docile however, Mexican beet farm laborers utilized a number of strategies to increase their control over their working conditions and to improve them. The workers' willingness to break off their contractual agreements with individual sugar companies, their mobility from one sugar district to another, their self initiative in selecting employers and their migration back to Texas after the harvest are but a few examples of those strategies.

Mexican migrant workers sought to improve their working conditions in the beet farms, but labor organizations among them were the exception and the laborers did not embark on any significant union activism during the 1920's. During those years, some beet farm hands formed small mutual aid societies such as *La Sociedad de Obreros Libres* in Gilcrest, Colorado and the *Alianza Hispano-America* organized around Brighton, Colorado and Cheyenne, Wyoming. In 1927, the American Federation of Labor did a fair amount of recruitment among beet laborers in those states and in Nebraska, but these organizing efforts proved short lived.²⁰ The Mexicans' relative quiescence in the North during the 1920's probably reflected the obstacles to organization posed by their migrant lives, always on the move, following the crops. The record number of Mexicans that immigrated to the United States in the decade of the 1920's probably constituted another obstacle to their organization, as surplus labor weakened the bargaining position of any farm workers union that might have formed at the time. The isolation of individual farm hands from other migrant laborers may also have been a significant barrier to their organization during the decade. In Detroit, Chicago and Gary, Indiana, where Mexican

factory workers enjoyed the concentration of an urban setting, there was significant labor organizing during the 1920's. Furthermore, in the small towns of the Midwest, a Chicano middle class that could have spoken for Mexican and Mexican American interests had not yet formed. In San Antonio and El Paso, which sustained larger and older Mexican settlements, such middle class had begun to appear in the 1920's and, coincidentally, both cities witnessed considerable labor activism in those years.²¹ In the 1930's however, Mexican beet laborers throughout the northern states actively organized and carried out strikes to demand higher wages.²²

CHAPTER 4

“BUSINESS IS BUSINESS”

Having studied the living and working conditions of Mexican migrant laborers in the beet farms, the analysis returns to the historical problem posed in chapter 2: During the first three decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant workers trekked north from Texas every year to labor in the sugar beet farms of the Midwest and the northern Plain and Mountain states. Did the migrants leave Texas to take advantage of better working and living conditions available in the North and to escape the harsh discrimination they consistently experienced in the Lone Star state, as the historical literature claims?¹

Building on the material presented in the last chapters, this section completes the analytical comparison between the workers in the northern beet fields and in the cotton and vegetable Texas farms. Specifically, it will look at the purchasing power of their earnings, the workers' living and working conditions, and the social, occupational and wage discrimination that the laborers experienced in both settings. The analysis will show that in Texas and in the northern states, employers and city folks forced the Mexicans immigrants into rigid stereotypes that served as the basis for various practices of discrimination against the workers. The last part of the chapter shows that three distinct factors drove the migrant stream North: A surplus of labor in Texas, a large demand for unskilled labor in the sugar beet industry and the possibility for the Mexican workers, however remote for most of them, of finding more permanent and higher paying employment in the foundries, meat packing houses, construction and car companies of the North.

In Texas and in the northern states, Mexican agricultural laborers experienced the same poverty and deprivation. Daily wages that ranged between \$0.80 and \$1 condemned the Mexican farm worker in Texas to poverty and squalor. In the smaller farms, the migrants were housed in overcrowded tents or wagons, provided by the farmers near the

work sites. At the end of the harvest season, many moved to the towns along the cotton belt or to the cities in the Rio Grande Valley, where they concentrated in segregated and crowded tenements. Journalists who visited the Mexican quarters in cities like San Antonio or El Paso in the 1910's described them as rows of long one story structures called *corrales*, each containing numerous rooms or "stalls", with little or no sanitation. One of these bare apartments rented for \$0.90 a week and for \$1.25 if equipped with a stove.² Often, to meet the rent payment, several families pooled their resources together and crowded inside one of those structures.

The living conditions of Mexican farm laborers in the beet farms were not substantially better. When *enganchadores* from the sugar beet companies recruited in the segregated Mexican quarters of El Paso, Brownsville, Laredo or San Antonio, many immigrant farm laborers signed up seasonal contracts to work in the beet fields of the northern states. There, they found higher wages in absolute terms, but an equally limited purchasing power that left them as destitute and impoverished as they had been in the Lone Star state and other regions of the US Southwest. A simple comparison will show this clearly. In the 1920's, a family of four, husband, wife and two small children, would earn about \$300 if they managed to find employment for six months of the year, picking cotton, vegetables or citrus fruit in the Rio Grande Valley.³ Assuming the family spent annually only \$150 in food, which would limit it to consuming few and simple items such as rice, corn, beans and some vegetables, and bought every year \$100 of cooking fuel, transportation, clothing, utensils and other essential consumer items, it would be left with \$50.⁴ Though the farmers provided tents, boxcars or sheds to house the family during the six months of employment in the fields, the workers had to pay rent for six months of the year with the \$50 left. With the *corrales* or stalls, which journalists in San Antonio found so appalling, renting for \$6 a month, it is easy to see that this was all the family could afford. The Mexican family of farm workers in Texas had no alternative but to live in the most squalid, overcrowded and destitute conditions.

In the northern sugar beet farms, Mexican migrant laborers did not afford better living standards, however. As shown in chapter 3, the same family of four was left with \$220 at the end of the sugar beet season with which to survive for the remainder of the year. Based on the food prices recorded by Edson, it can be estimated that, in the six months between beet seasons, our family spent about \$80 in the same simple diet of rice, corn, beans and vegetables, and approximately \$70 in cooking fuel, candles, transportation, some clothing and other essential consumer items.⁵ The remaining \$70 would have to cover the cost of heating during the long and cold winter months, as well as housing. In the North, Mexican migrants had no alternative but to live in poor, crowded and dilapidated shacks, like those at Alberta Lee, Minnesota, that rented for \$8 a month, and that Edson found were the rule among the migrant workers that stayed close to the farms after the beet harvest.⁶ In the farms of both Texas and the northern states then, Mexican laborers experienced the same oppressive living conditions and received practically the same low wages that kept them poor and destitute.

The very low standard of living of the workers resulted largely from the fact that the fundamental economics of sugar beet and cotton farming were equally poor in the 1920's. The same conditions of limited and declining growers' profitability prevailed in Texas cotton ranches, the main employer of Mexican agricultural laborers in the Lone Star state, and in Midwestern beet farms. In Texas, rapid escalation of land cost, rising cost of credit and declining cotton market prices reduced the profits of ranchers and growers, particularly those of small and medium size land owners. During the 1920's, many cotton farmers in Texas lost their land and were reduced to tenancy and sharecropping.⁷ Large, corporate cotton ranches remained prosperous, but throughout the Texas cotton country, any profits gained by the farmer often resulted exclusively from the exploitation of his labor force and from the meager wages he paid. In the beet farms of the North, the sugar companies, which dominated the industry and worked together to protect their common interest, expanded their profit margins by imposing on the growers

relatively low sale prices for their beets. The refineries also made the growers bear all the costs of production, including labor, as well as the transportation of the product. Like their counterparts in the Texas cotton region, northern beet farmers in the 1920's confronted low and declining profit margins in a labor intensive business. Struggling to make some economic gains, both groups of employers turned to the exploitation of their respective labor forces, the Mexican migrant workers.⁸

Cotton and beet farmers managed to do this because they had access to a pool of abundant unskilled labor. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, Texan and northern agricultural employers worked hard to maintain an extensive supply of unskilled and semi-skilled labor that enabled them to keep their labor costs lower than those of most other employers. Working with lobbyists, farmers throughout the country explicitly asked the Federal government to relax restrictions on Mexican immigration, because this was the cheapest labor they could find. Thus, in the 1926 hearings of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, the farmers' spokesman explained: "...to allow the landowners to make a profit in their farms, they want to get the cheapest labor they can find and...the Mexican worker enables them to make a profit. If (the farmers) have to pay a higher price for labor, there is a loss, instead of profit".⁹ Throughout his reports, Edson noted the widespread belief of beet farmers and sugar companies that the financial prosperity of the industry depended on Mexican labor.¹⁰ Northern sugar beet companies set up sophisticated Labor Departments in their corporate organizations to recruit in the US Southwest and tap into the fast growing Mexican unskilled labor pool.¹¹ In Texas and in the northern beet fields in the 1910's and 1920's, farmers took advantage of the steady labor migration across the US-Mexico border employing the Mexicans in jobs no one else wanted and paying them the lowest compensation of any group.

If Mexican farm laborers experienced similar misery and poverty in Texas and in the northern sugar beet farms, their working conditions were also similarly difficult,

because in both cases, the migrants were tied to the farmer and his field. In the cotton belt of the Lone Star state, Mexican migrants experienced hard working conditions which they could not easily escape because, often, the employer kept the laborers almost literally tied to the farms. Immediately upon the immigrants' arrival in the cotton fields under the supervision of the *enganchadores*, cotton farmers in Texas charged their employees the cost of transportation from the border and the labor agent's fees. Employers also charged their farm hands the value of some basic supplies which the farmers usually provided the first day, such as beans, bacon, pots and pans. As Fred Roberts, a cotton grower from Corpus Christi explained in 1919, growers recovered the expenses they incurred to secure their workers by charging \$15 to \$20 for a family of husband, wife and one child, from the employee's first week's wages.¹² Thus, even before receiving their first job assignment, many Mexican immigrant agricultural workers in Texas were in arrears for a good portion of their first weeks' wages. The Mexican immigrants, who had already spent a significant amount of their money paying their way across the international border, had little choice but to acquiesce to the farmer's demands and abuse.

In Texas, cotton farmers did not hesitate to use armed guards to force any recalcitrant employee to work the fields and pay the debts the farmer claimed he owed. After 1924, the employer's threat to turn the farm hand over to the Border Patrol acted as clear deterrent for many workers, who had entered the country illegally, to leave the farms before the end of the harvest.¹³ In the large corporate ranches, employers justified their close supervision of the work gangs by portraying the Mexicans as lazy, prone to quit their jobs and to loaf once they had accumulated a little money.¹⁴ Ranch owners also paid their Mexican migrant workers with coupons that could only be redeemed at company stores.¹⁵ Consistently and in multiple ways, Texas employers tried to tie their Mexican farm hands to their fields.

In perhaps more subtle but equally oppressive ways, northern beet growers also sought to limit the ability of their Mexican help to quit their jobs in the farms when unsatisfied with the working and living conditions. Growers and sugar beet companies had real concerns about their workers finishing their contracts and showing up at the critical time of the harvest and they made every effort to tie the migrants to the beet fields. Sugar manufacturers also worried about not having enough control over the migrant workers during the winter months, to ensure their return to the beet districts in the early spring. To increase their control, employers withheld payment of wages and deducted their transportation costs from the workers' earnings until completion of their contracts. These measures were amply justified, the farmers claimed, because "...the Mexican is likely to drift away when he is offered good wages at other work, and the company will have to pay another man a premium to get the beets harvested".¹⁶ As chapter 3 showed, sugar refineries also tied the workers to the beet districts through indebtedness. Many advanced the migrants money or goods in the winter, when the workers were most destitute, and withheld the wages at the beginning of the following season to repay the advances. In Texas and in the beet farms, Mexican laborers faced labor relations and practices that reduced their freedom of movement and their ability to abandon unsatisfactory jobs and oppressive working conditions.

In the cotton ranches of the Southwest and in the beet farms of the North, the Mexican migrants suffered wage discrimination. Texas cotton farmers paid their Mexican workers wages well below the earnings of other unskilled jobs in towns and in the countryside. In the 1920's, these farm hands received \$0.80 to \$1 per day.¹⁷ In the Lone Star state, Mexican employees of railroad and public works companies received better wages, averaging \$1.25 and \$1.35 per day, while mine workers made daily wages of \$1.65 to \$1.75.¹⁸ But those Mexicans who annually migrated to the beet fields of the North also found themselves occupying the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Sugar beet farm hands made 25% less than their counterparts in railroad and highway

construction and only two thirds of the wages of unskilled laborers in tanneries, meat packing houses, tanneries and metal foundries in the northern states.¹⁹

So, if the Mexican farm laborer found the same poverty, deprivation and hard working conditions in Texas and in the northern sugar beet fields, did he embark on his trip north to escape the social and racial discrimination he consistently experienced in the Lone Star state? In Texas, racial categories and stereotypes helped farmers justify the wage and occupational discrimination they practiced against their Mexican employees. First, they categorized Mexicans as unambiguously nonwhite. The term “Mexican” was used to distinguish immigrants from south of the border from both whites and blacks. A Texas congressman observed in 1921 that “...the word Mexican is used to indicate race, not a citizen or subject of the country. There are probably 250,000 Mexicans in Texas who were born in the state but they are “Mexicans” just as all blacks are Negroes though they may have five generations of American ancestors”.²⁰ Then, white landowners and farm tenants in Texas built racial and social stigmas around farm wage labor, which they defined as a nonwhite occupation.

Giving voice to these discriminatory racial categorizations, the economist Ruth Allen wrote in 1930 that, since farm workers were forced to endure squalid conditions as well as low wages, many farm owners in Texas preferred to hire Mexicans because “...the American landowner and his wife dislike to see white people living that way...”²¹ For many whites in Texas, only Mexicans were supposed to “grub” the land and work under Mexican foremen and until the Great Depression, few whites hired themselves as farm hands in the state. Impoverished white farm owners and tenants found these racial constructions particularly helpful as they sought to differentiate themselves from Mexicans and Blacks, with whom they now shared the same poverty.²² Throughout Texas in the first decades of the twentieth century, racial prejudice against the Mexican immigrants resulted not only in extraordinarily harsh living and working conditions for

the workers, but also in their social discrimination and segregation in schools, city neighborhoods, churches and public facilities.²³

But beet growers and sugar companies in the northern states also resorted to crude stereotypes to justify the preference they showed for almost exclusively hiring Mexicans to do the strenuous, back breaking, “stoop” labor in the farms. The employers remarked that Mexican men, “...though not muscularly as strong as northern Europeans, nor as active and big, show greater endurance...than most other races”.²⁴ With this argument, reminiscent of social Darwinism, Mexicans were categorized as the most fit for back breaking farm labor, yet inferior to other races that presumably showed greater fitness to hold less difficult and higher paying jobs.

These stereotypes, so convenient to the farmer, were still repeated years later when in 1942, Professor J.F. Thaden of Michigan State College asserted that “...Michigan’s beet growers have leaned heavily on the Texas labor surplus because the Mexican, by physique and temperament, seems better suited to the job than any other available nationality group”.²⁵ Perhaps the dynamics that the labor historian David Roediger sees in the formation of the American working class were at play here. Roediger argues that the racism of this working class in its formative years was underpinned by psychological and ideological mechanisms that reinforced racial stereotypes and that helped forge the identities of white workers in opposition to Blacks. Undoubtedly, the stereotypes forced on the Mexican farm laborers helped employers keep the migrants’ wages depressed. But they probably also assisted Eastern European immigrants, who had preceded the Mexicans in the beet fields, to become “white”, to establish an identity in opposition to the Mexicans and thus acquire greater labor mobility.²⁶ The same dynamics probably applied between white tenant farmers and Mexican agricultural workers in Texas.

Northern factory employers also used racial stereotypes to conveniently confine the Mexican worker to the most physically difficult and repetitive jobs. Factory

supervisors explained to Edson in the mid 1920's that they knew Mexicans who worked continuously for a year, without a day off, in iron foundries where other nationalities would not stay for a month. For the employers, the facts that Mexicans worked in subzero weather on the railroad tracks of Minnesota, or with wet and cold clothing in the tanneries, were clear indications that they had the endurance and were ideally suited for these jobs. In their conversations with Edson, bosses and supervisors appear not to have considered the possibility that discrimination had left the Mexicans with no alternative employment that offered better working conditions.

Sugar refineries and beet growers held other oversimplified mental pictures of the Mexican workers that reflected their prejudiced attitude and uncritical judgment. The employers did not see the harsh living conditions that the Mexicans endured during the slack winter months as a direct result of the poor wages they paid the laborers in the beet farms. Instead, farmers and refineries ascribed to the migrants profligate buying habits. If only Mexicans, particularly the younger ones, did not spend in extravagant items such as radios, phonographs or used cars, they would "...be able to pass the winter in comparative comfort" and presumably return to the beet farms the following season.²⁷ Employers regarded the Mexicans' habit of sending money to their dependents in Mexico as poor planning skills, commenting that some of the beet workers, who did not understand that work on the winter was scarce, sent so much of their money home that they became penniless before the spring.²⁸ For some, the extreme poverty of the Mexican derived from the fact that "...he is easy picking for the sharp salesman, a good spender in a Greek' pool room and a mark for the bootlegger".²⁹ His character and habits, not his compensation, kept the Mexican worker in poverty.

Other, even harsher stereotypes helped perpetuate prejudice and discrimination against the Mexican migrants in the North. As a resident of a Minnesota town commented, Mexicans were dirty and they "...would sooner drink ditch water than go forty yards to a good well".³⁰ Edson himself remarked in thinly disguised contempt that

“...flies swarm in their (the Mexicans’) colonies and the odor of refuse is often of high horsepower. Fruit drying on wires out of doors is covered with big green flies hatched in the privies nearby”.³¹ A school principal in Nebraska boasted he regularly sent Mexican boys to the showers because “... they had a coating of dirt which could have been scraped off with a hoe”.³² Northern employers, officials and communities alike felt repulsed by the squalor and poverty that afflicted the Mexicans. But few appear to have addressed the miserable and discriminatory working conditions imposed on the migrant laborers as the real causes of the problem. In Texas, cotton farmers often justified their practice of wage and occupational discrimination of their Mexican help by arguing that the immigrants were used to much harsher conditions in Mexico.³³ Displaying a thought process reminiscent of the Texas cotton farmer’s, beet growers commented that their Mexican farm hands “...are better off here than in Texas or in any of the larger cities”.³⁴ Evidently, employers everywhere found comfort in the assumption that their workers’ conditions were worse in their previous jobs and locations.

These assumptions notwithstanding, Mexican migrant workers in the northern communities were subject to the same social discrimination they experienced in Texas. Edson reported that immigrant Mexicans were “segregated in play houses, not welcomed in restaurants, barber shops and public swimming pools and frowned upon at public picnics and dances”.³⁵ Northern communities saw the Mexicans as dirty, as some sort of “social pollution”, reminiscent of James C. Scott’s description of the discursive affirmations of the members of high castes in some societies. As Scott explains, these individuals claimed higher status and power and built their public discourse of domination by portraying the lower castes as dirty, impure, capable of polluting temples and drinking wells with their mere presence.³⁶ Similarly, the white folks in northern towns in the 1920’s used segregation to keep the “filthy” Mexicans from “contaminating” their public spaces, just as they also segregated Blacks.

Mexican migrant workers resisted this social discrimination resorting to the official channels they had available in the United States. Edson observed that the Mexicans appealed in several cases to their consuls for redress of their grievances. In 1927, in Horton, Kansas, where several hundred Mexican migrants labored for the Rock Island railroad, a new theater sent the Mexicans to the gallery, along with its black patrons. The Mexicans resisted and asked their consul in Kansas City to intervene. The consul managed to negotiate a compromise whereby the Mexicans were assigned a separate theater section, but on the main floor. The same year, responding to the workers' complaints, the Mexican consul in Milwaukee denounced in public the ill treatment of Mexicans in the beet fields.³⁷

But for beet growers and sugar refineries, it was all a matter of economics. As the former explained to Edson in 1927, they paid the Mexicans the rates they offered to other farm hands. A good resident farm worker received \$50 to \$60 a month during the summer, equivalent to the Mexican migrants' earnings, considering the latter benefited from gardens, free rent housing and local food prices. The resident farm laborer received \$40 a month and his keep during the slack months, but in contrast, the growers acknowledged, "...the period of idleness is what burns (the Mexicans) up". Any man who knew the business of agriculture realized that the problem was not easily solved. Repeatedly, beet farmers explained to Edson that they simply could not pay any more, nor could they employ or provide for their Mexican migrant help during the winter months.³⁸

The sugar refineries also saw their laborers through the single lens of their own economic profit. They knew that the Mexican beet workers complained to their consuls about the "heartless" companies that advanced them cash in the winter to buy coal and to pay their rent, but strictly deducted these advances from the workers' pay the following summer, leaving them in constant indebtedness and poverty. But, the Labor Departments of the sugar companies pointed out to Edson, "...business is business and a contract

means what it says". Assisting the Mexicans was not a matter of charity for, while "charity had made Mexico a nation of beggars, justice was the foundation of our [American] institutions".³⁹

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, Mexican agricultural laborers faced the same poverty, harsh working conditions, and wage and social discrimination in Texas and in the beet farms of the Great Lakes and northern Plain and Mountain states. The migrants who worked for the beet growers from May to November every year did not travel north to enjoy a better standard of living, or a respite from social and racial discrimination. Instead, the laborers traveled north pushed by the steady and growing flow of unskilled labor that crossed the US-Mexico border, a stream that peaked in the 1920's. They were also pulled by the increasing demand for unskilled labor in the beet farms of the North, caused by the sugar beet boom of the early 1900's.

Factory jobs delivered significantly higher wages and added permanency to the work and place of residence of the Mexican migrants who were lucky enough to get them.⁴⁰ Beet farm laborers received only one third of the wages paid to unskilled workers in the city factories. The migrants' living conditions were changed by the city in other important ways. There, Mexicans still lived in often crowded, poor and segregated quarters, in boarding houses and small apartments. But in cities where their number reached a few thousands in the 1920's, like Chicago and Detroit, the Mexicans had their own restaurants, churches, mutual aid organizations and even newspapers. In his 1926 survey of the Mexican population of Detroit, Edson noted some Spanish language publications, such as "*Artes y Letras*" and "*Eco de la Patria*".⁴¹ In the industrial cities of the North, Mexican workers participated more fully in the American mass culture of the 1920's embodied in the new cars, radios, phonographs and movie houses. Families sent their children to school and the younger women sought jobs in factories and stores. Throughout the 1920's, many Mexicans settled permanently in the northern cities and sent for relatives and friends still in Mexico, or in the US Southwest, to join them. Sadly,

in 1930 and 1931, during the Great Depression, the majority of these families were involuntarily expatriated to Mexico, their economic gains lost and their lives abruptly uprooted once again.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis has several implications for the historiography of American labor, US-Mexico borderlands, immigration and ethnicity. In the field of American labor, this study shows that the migrants that labored in the beet fields did not take away jobs from skilled American wage earners, as organized labor and other groups asserted throughout the 1920's.¹ The war emergency measures that exempted Mexican labor from the 1917 Immigration Act's restrictions resulted in the admission into the United States of large number of workers under contract during the 1917-1924 period and without a contract in the same and in subsequent years. As farmers pressured legislators in Washington to keep the gates open to imported agricultural workers, organized labor repeatedly argued throughout the decade of the 1920's, that Mexican immigrants had begun drifting into the cities to compete with skilled citizen laborers.²

This study shows however, that in 1926-1927, in the northcentral states, at least half of the Mexican beet farm hands returned to the Southwest at the end of the harvest season, where they labored in agricultural jobs in the fields, or in unskilled jobs in the towns.³ Of those that remained in the North during the winter, some stayed in the beet districts, others drifted back to the Southwest and the rest moved temporarily to northern cities. But Edson's reports are filled with descriptions of the poverty that the Mexican beet workers endured during the winter months in the urban centers of the North, because "...jobs [in the winter] are exceedingly scarce".⁴ Edson observed that many of these Mexican migrants, unable to get employment, ended up "...living from their summer's savings".⁵ The migrants faced enough hardship and unemployment in the winter months that "...some sugar companies advanced credit for food and fuel to the migrants, to keep them from attracting public notice in appealing from charity".⁶ It is clear then that the majority of beet farm hands could not find jobs in factories, nor in construction or the railways, during the winter months. To be sure, the factories and foundries of the

northern industrial cities did employ Mexican labor in the 1920's, and some of these factory workers probably had first toiled in the beet fields. But by and large, these Mexican industrial laborers performed unskilled tasks. In Detroit for example, Edson observed that "...the Mexican probably draws the lowest rate of wage because of the proportion of unskilled workers".⁷ In the 1920's, Mexican beet workers did not take away jobs from skilled citizen wage earners.

This research also suggests that the Mexican migrant workers fit with the pattern of the historical experience of other immigrant labor groups, such as the Irish in earlier decades. As the newer arrivals, these immigrants had also been confined to the lowest paying jobs in factories and construction, while other laborers ascended to better remunerated positions. My analysis indicates that racial stereotypes imposed on Mexican laborers by their employers in farms and factories served to confine the immigrants to the lowest paying, physically hardest jobs, and that this process facilitated the upward mobility of other worker groups. In Texas, only Mexicans were supposed to "grub" the land, an assertion that kept whites from having to hire themselves out as farm hands until the Great Depression. In the beet districts, the growers and sugar companies regarded the migrants as the best suited to do the "stoop" labor in the farms because "...they show greater endurance than most other races".⁸ With such a "good fit" between Mexicans and beet work, Eastern and central European immigrants, who had preceded the migrants in the fields, could now rise to the status of farm owners. Even in the factories, supervisors claimed that Mexicans were particularly well suited for difficult, unskilled labor, explaining to Edson that "... as to strength and endurance, [Mexicans] often excel other nationalities. Their ability to work in heat is notable...and they can lift heavy weights and stand long hours better than any race but negroes".⁹ In Flint, "...since 1916,...car companies have been using Mexicans in the hot part of their works where only Mexicans will stay on the job".¹⁰ In the 1920's, Mexican immigrants did not compete with skilled American workers, as organized labor claimed. Instead, as this

study shows, they occupied the lowest paying rungs of the agricultural and industrial labor ladders which, once labeled “Mexican work”, provided other workers with the opportunity to escalate to better and higher paying jobs.

In another area relevant to American labor history, this study notes the regional differences in the degree of labor organization among beet workers in the wide territory covered by Edson in 1926-1927. Chapter 3 showed that Mexican farm hands in the Midwest displayed relative quiescence in the same 1920’s, while Mexican agricultural laborers in the Mountain states formed small mutual aids societies and actively responded to the recruitment efforts of the American Federation of Labor in the same years. The historiography of American labor records that in the same Mountain states in the 1910’s and 1920’s, there was significant labor activism among mine workers, which included several thousands of Mexicans.¹¹ My analysis indicates that the labor agitation in the region -described extensively in the historiography of American labor- expanded beyond the mines to the beet fields in the 1920’s.

The current study also has some implications for the historiography of Mexican migrant communities in the US-Mexico borderlands. Historians like Sarah Deutsch, have observed that these migrants often maintained close cultural and economic ties with their original communities, as part of their strategy of survival in the borderlands.¹² My study confirms the importance of these connections in the lives of the migrant beet workers in the Midwest, even though these agricultural laborers were quite removed from the physical borderlands and their original communities. Edson noted in a number of cases that Mexicans in the beet farms periodically sent bank remittances to help family and dependents in Mexico or in the US Southwest.¹³ This research also makes evident that the laborers mitigated their cultural and social isolation in the beet districts, and the stresses of a different culture, by periodically migrating south, to Texas or even Mexico. The *betabeleros*, like Mexican migrants in the Southwest, kept close links with their original communities.

This research makes another contribution to the historiography of immigration and ethnicity, by revealing the nativist feelings against the Mexican beet laborers existent in the 1920's in the northern communities close to the farms, and which may have contributed to the involuntary repatriation of the immigrants during the Great Depression. Concentrated in the lowest paying occupations, the Mexicans were an easy target for removal from the work force when the Great Depression drastically reduced the availability of higher paying jobs. The single largest employer of Mexican labor at the time, commercial agriculture, confined these workers to the lowest rungs of the labor ladder. In the factories of the Midwest, bosses also assigned Mexican workers the lowest paying positions.¹⁴ Other labor groups that had also been historically subjected to wage and occupational discrimination at the time, such as factory women and Blacks, were also among the first to lose their jobs in the Depression.¹⁵

But the vast majority of Mexicans not only lost their employment in factories and farms in the American North, but also their ability to stay in the country and to receive some welfare relief. This research reveals a significant amount of nativist sentiment displayed against the Mexican laborers, which may have contributed to the campaign of state and local Welfare Department officials to repatriate them. Edson's survey of the Mexican laborers in beet fields and city factories suggests that employers and local communities held images of the migrants that portrayed them as foreign and un-American. In the beet farmers' view, the migrants were unwilling to adopt American customs. The laborers retained instead strong economic and emotional ties with Mexico, as evidenced by their continued remittances of money to that country, even at the cost of considerable sacrifice. As one grower noted, the beet workers sent sometimes a considerable portion of their earnings to their dependents back in Mexico, and consequently "...the family was left with insufficient funds for their own needs".¹⁶ Furthermore, the workers did not show particular interest in improving their knowledge of the English language. As Edson reported, in the beet fields, about 65 percent of the

Mexicans “... were unable to converse the language and made no effort to learn it”.¹⁷ The Mexicans also maintained a strong attachment to their old country’s popular religion, Catholicism. Employers and government field investigators saw the laborers’ religious feelings as closely allied with their love for their native country. They interpreted the Mexicans’ reluctance to accept the teachings of Protestant missionaries and social workers as fear that acceptance would undermine their nationalism.¹⁸ In the eyes of employers and surrounding communities, the migrant beet laborers belonged to a separate nation and were not part of the American community.

My research also shows that at least in the beet districts of the numerous states surveyed by Edson in 1926-27, the idea of this separate nation, Mexico, appears to have been inextricably tied to the concept of a lower race, that lacked the superior qualities of the Anglo-Saxon race, intelligence, ambition, thrift, work ethics, love of freedom and respect for the law. As Edson summed it up for his superiors at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, reflecting his own and the views of the migrants employers’, the Mexican beet farm hands were un-American because:

the majority have a confused notion of American customs, a rather unwilling compliance with our code of business, a suspicion regarding anybody’s counsel and a hostile attitude towards the law. They do not differentiate between a federal law and a village ordinance, a marine and a traffic cop or anything having a distinct entity to us. Everything is just United States to them. It is therefore difficult for a company to teach them to save their money, stick to their work and conform to our laws and customs. Whether their notions are the result of unfair and bullying execution of laws in Mexico, a natural wildness towards all government or a wonderful teaching against the United States is a hard matter to determine, but a good guess would be a combination of all three.¹⁹

Employers and neighboring communities saw the Mexican migrant beet laborers as unwilling or incapable of appreciating American values and institutions.

On another occasion, commenting on the general poverty that characterized the condition of the Mexican beet workers who spent their winter in destitute colonies at the

edge of town, a sugar refinery official opined that the problem was that Mexicans, "...lacking the social, economic and intellectual struggle that the English speaking people have had, look at life from an entirely different viewpoint". From his perspective, the beet workers displayed lack of "fundamental understanding of human endeavor" -presumably of American capitalist enterprise- when they felt cheated after not receiving a bonus. Failing to see why a rich company that could afford it would not give them any extra money, these Mexican laborers behaved like children "...who feel slighted by Santa Claus when other children are getting pretty dolls".²⁰ As he concluded, "our system is beyond their comprehension".²¹ Mexican migrant farm laborers appear to have been generally perceived by their employers and other white individuals who came in contact with the migrants, like school officials, missionary workers and town residents, as foreign and lacking an understanding and appreciation for American mores and values. Perhaps these perceptions made the repatriation of the Mexicans a viable economic solution to the scarcity of the Depression years in the eyes of state and welfare officials.

My study also raises some important issues in areas of concern for the histories of labor and immigration. Among them is the questions of whether the repatriation of the 1930's retarded the assimilation of the Mexican beet laborers in the larger American society, or that of Mexican factory workers. To determine the degree of assimilation of the latter group is particularly important. It would help understand the extent of the Mexicans' participation in the inter-ethnic and inter-racial alliances observed by Lizabeth Cohen in Chicago in the 1930's, and which she argues enabled the workers to achieve some working class unity during those years?²² I hope that one of the contributions of this work is to point at the potential rewards and at the need for continued historical research of Mexican laborers in the United States during the first decades of the 1900's including among them, of course, those that toiled in the sugar beet farms of the North.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Dennis Nodin Valdes, *El Pueblo Mexicano en Detroit y Michigan: A Social History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982). See also Dennis Nodin Valdes, *Al Norte. Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

2. Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States* (1949; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 180-183. See also Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America. A History of Chicanos* (third ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 180-184.

3. Otey M. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem. Mexican Agricultural Labor in the United States 1942-1954* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 111-150.

4. Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow. Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 49-150.

5. Valdes, *Al Norte*, 29.

6. Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North. A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

7. A few examples include: Neil Foley, *The White Scourge. Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants. The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (Texas: Texas A&M University, 1993); Paul S. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier: Nueces County, Texas* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1934). The conditions of the agricultural worker in Mexico during the first decades of the twentieth century have also been documented, though not extensively. See for example Paul S. Taylor, A Spanish-Mexican Community, Aranda in Jalisco, Mexico, 1933, in Carlos E. Cortes, editor, *Mexican Migration to the United States* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Maria Vargas-Lobsinger, *La Hacienda de "La Concha": Una Empresa Algodonera de La Laguna, 1883,1917* (Mexico City: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, 1984); William K. Meyers, *La Comarca Lagunera: Work, Protest and Popular Mobilization in North Central Mexico*, in Thomas Benjamin and William McNellie, ed. *Other Mexicos: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1876-1911* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984) and David W. Walker, "Homegrown Revolution: The Hacienda Santa Catalina del Alamo y Anexas and Agrarian Protest in Eastern Durango, Mexico, 1897-1913", *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72:2 pp 239-273 (1992).

8. Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 3, 13-24; Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 111-148.

9. See Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 79.

10. The Alien Contract labor Law of 1885 prevented employers from importing directly "cheap, foreign labor". In 1917, Congress placed a \$8 head tax and required a literacy test for foreigners entering the US. See Juan Gomez Quinones, *Mexican Immigration to*

the United States and the Internationalization of Labor, 1848-1980: An Overview, in Antonio Rios Bustamante, *Mexican Immigrant Workers in the US* (Los Angeles: University of California, Chicano Studies Research Center, 1981), 23.

11. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 104.

12. This information is repeated in several of Edson's reports. See for example George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Sugar Beet Work in the Central West", 1927, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1, 6. (Hereafter cited as CW).

CHAPTER 1

1. Though their names are fictitious, the life and working conditions of the subjects in this chapter are reconstructed as a composite or aggregate of data found in various reports written by George T. Edson, as well as in the secondary sources examined. I have referenced each major element used to build this composite with an individual endnote.

2. Edson describes in detail the "stoop" labor in the sugar beet fields in several of his reports. See for example George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Our Northcentral States", 1927, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 12-13. (Hereafter cited as NCS). See also George T. Edson, "Field Report for Scottsbluff, Gering, Minatare, Bayard, Mitchell and Lyman, Nebraska", 1927, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1, 2.

3. By 1926-26, the largest proportion of beet farm workers were Mexicans and beet labor came to be recognized as "Mexican" work. See CW, 1.

4. In 1927, Edson reported that about one third of the Mexicans in the Midwest were able to make themselves understood in English. See NCS, 23. Regarding gang work, because beet work was paid by the acre, it was particularly suited for families or groups of workers. Children were often included, as reported by Edson in CW, 2, 3. Edson also noted that one of the adult males in a group of workers often acted as a contractor who signed the agreement with the sugar company. The workers under a contractor often included his wife and children, though he generally had other relatives, and sometimes just friends or merely "compadres". See George T. Edson, "Northern Sugar Beet Workers", 1927, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 4, 5. (Hereafter cited as NOR).

5. Edson reported that in 1927, in the Northcentral states, which included Michigan, the majority of Mexican beet farm hands came originally from the Mexican states of Michoacan, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. See NCS, 3. Edson also reported that the majority of these Mexicans had been hired by the sugar companies in San Antonio and Fort Worth, Texas. See NCS, 12.

6. Typically, a male worker tended an average of 7 to 9 acres. See CW, 2. Thus, three males, two females and their children would work a total of about 30 acres.

7. Edson describes the supplemental labor performed by the Mexican migrants during the idle periods of the beet season. Workers were paid in installments, the third of which was paid at the end of the harvest. Thus, if the migrants did not show up at harvest time, they would forgo about a third of their contracted pay. See NCS, 14.

8. The domestic chores of women are described in some detail in Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 29-30. See also Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land. Migrants and*

Migratory Labor in the United States (1941; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 276.

9. Edson describes similar living arrangements provided by the sugar beet farmers. See NCS, 18 and NOR 10-13.

10. Ibid.

11. See for example Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 29.

12. Many of the Mexican immigrants in the sugar beet farms maintained close ties with Mexico, where they periodically sent bank remittances to help family and dependents. See NCS, 20, 21; CW, 10; and NOR, 7.

13. Edson reports contain numerous accounts of this type of social discrimination suffered by the Mexican beet laborers in the towns near the beet districts. See CW, 9; CW, 11.

14. We can assert that the Mexican beet farm hands could rarely afford to buy tickets in the towns' theaters after performing a quick calculations based on the wages they received, the price of food and other staples, and the cost of their transportation at the end of the beet season, all of which were reported by Edson. Chapter 4 of this study provides these detailed calculations.

15. The functions and behavior of the *coyotes* and *enganchadores* are well described in McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 179. The fees collected by *enganchadores* and *coyotes*, from both immigrants and growers, are described in Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 18. See also Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 39.

16. See Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 18. The author describes how farmers in Texas deducted from the first weeks' wages of the Mexican immigrants the transportation and labor agent fees they had paid in advance.

17. See Foley, *The White Scourge*, 49.

18. Ibid., 130. These wages represent actual 1920's values and have not been converted to present day dollars.

19. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the volume of Mexican immigrants in the United States peaked during the 1920's. For a discussion and statistics, see Scruggs, *Braceros*, "Wetbacks", and the *Farm Labor Problem*, 106. This high volume of immigration maintained a surplus of unskilled labor in much of the Southwest. See Acuna, *Occupied America*, 178-188.

20. See NOR, 17 for details on average wages and number of acres tended per male adult worker in the beet fields, in 1927.

21. The voluntary and involuntary repatriation of Mexican immigrants during the Great Depression is well documented in the literature. See for example Acuna, *Occupied America*, 202-203.

CHAPTER 2

1. See for example Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 13 and Scruggs, *Braceros*, "Wetbacks", and the *Farm Labor Problem*, 116. Both authors argue that race prejudice against the Mexicans was most virulent in Texas. See also Valdes, *Al Norte*, 18-29. Valdes correctly argues that in South Texas, farmers successfully pushed for laws that barred farm workers from participating in mainstream civic affairs and precluded them from enjoying the rights of citizens, whereas in the Midwest, growers were less able to

push for such laws. But he asserts that Mexican immigrants in the Midwest generally found there weaker barriers to participation in social and institutional life, and less segregation than in the Southwest.

2. Acuna, *Occupied America*, 153.

3. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 45.

4. NCS, 12-13. Also, CW, 4.

5. For farmers' income, see CW, 4.

6. Edson explains the workers' living arrangements in several reports, including NCS, 18; NOR 10-13.

7. John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico. The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 162.

8. *Ibid.*, 164.

9. Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 14.

10. For an estimate of the number of Mexican immigrants that moved to the United States as a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, see Myron Gutman, Robert McCaa, Rodolfo Gutierrez-Montes and Brian Gratton, *The Demographic Impact of the Mexican Revolution in the United States* (paper presented by the authors at the X Reunion de Historiadores Mexicanos y Norteamericanos, Fort Worth, Texas, Nov 19-22, 1999). These authors estimate that between 1911 and 1919, 65,000 to 127,000 Mexicans immigrated to the United States, exclusively because of the Revolution.

11. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 106.

12. Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 28, 57.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.

14. George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Detroit, Michigan", 1926, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1. (Hereafter cited as DET).

15. DET, 2-24. See also George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Pontiac, Michigan", 1926, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1-2. (Hereafter cited as PONT); and "Mexicans in Flint, Michigan", 1926, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1-4. (Hereafter cited as FLINT).

16. NOR, 1-16. See also CW, 1-14.

17. CW, 1.

18. For proportion of migrant loners to women and children, see NCS, 12. The number of acres tended by a family of four is reported by Edson in several documents. See NCS, 14; CW, 2; NOR, 4.

19. CW, 7-8.

20. NCS, 3. A detailed study of the labor migration stream, that traces the workers from Mexico to the sugar beet farms in the northern United States, would be necessary to understand the reasons why these points of origin were relatively prevalent at the time Edson conducted his survey. We can speculate that by 1926, the northern Mexican states' economy, still not recovered from the ravages of the 1910-1920 revolution, continued to push industrial and agricultural workers north to the United States. Peasants from Mexican states like Michoacan, which suffered economic dislocations from the Cristero

wars of the 1920's, may have joined the migrants from the northern states during this decade.

21. NOR, 2.

22. NOR, 3.

23. NOR, 17.

24. NCS, 4-5. These figures were probably not always accurate. Wages were given to Edson by employers or taken from pay rolls. However, Mexicans reported to Edson that these pay rates were higher than actual practice. Besides, in the industrial centers covered by Edson, wages were not uniform, and the figures cited represent averages.

25. NCS, 14.

26. NCS, 15.

27. NCS, 14. See also CW, 5-6.

28. George T. Edson, "*Mexicans in Sugar Beet Work in the Arkansas River Valley of Kansas*", 1927, Paul S. Taylor Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 5. (Hereafter cited as KANSAS FR).

29. NOR, 5.

30. See Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 125-127. The results of the Sugar Act of 1937 were not always beneficial to the workers. The Sugar Act was designed to assist the sagging beet and cane sugar industries through government payments made in return for employer compliance with certain stipulations, including payment of minimum wages set annually by the Secretary of Agriculture. These minimum wages were determined at open hearings in which the workers were not always represented, however. The result was a low, uniform wage, established sometimes without the laborers' input and imposed on them by the farmers as mandated by the Federal Government.

31. CW, 6.

32. NOR, 2.

33. NOR, 6.

CHAPTER 3

1. NCS, 15.

2. Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 21.

3. NCS, 14.

4. NOR, 7.

5. NOR, 7; NCS, 19.

6. George Brown Thindall and David E. Shi, *America. A Narrative History* (Fourth ed. New York: Norton, 1996), 1016.

7. NCS, 15.

8. CW, 14. Because Mexicans tended to leave a farm or a beet district if more remunerative work was available elsewhere, total numbers were difficult to discern.

9. NOR, 3.

10. NOR, 4. On the basis of the pay reductions of \$5 per acre implemented by sugar companies that deducted their transportation costs from the laborer's wages, we can estimate the fares to be around \$30 to \$35. Because the refineries negotiated a discounted

return fare for the workers, we can assume that the migrants had to pay between \$20 to \$25 for the railroad trip back to the Southwest.

11. NOR, 3.

12. CW, 10.

13. NOR, 6.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 10.

16. Ibid., 13.

17. Ibid., 11.

18. Ibid.

19. CW, 1.

20. In California however, in 1928, the United Confederation of Mexican Workers struck the fruit growers in the Imperial Valley, demanding better wages and working conditions. See Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 130-132. See also Acuna, *Occupied America*, 180-181.

21. In the 1920's, when immigration was high - 500,000 legal entries recorded- there was relatively low union activism. In the 1930's, immigration declined to 30,000 legal entries and a higher degree of union organization and activism took place among Mexican agricultural laborers. See Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 106. For an overview of Mexican immigration into the United States, and the economic and political forces that drove it, see Juan Gomez Quinones, *Mexican Immigration to the United States and the Internationalization of Labor, 1848-1980: An Overview*, 15-30. See also, David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors. Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 39-68.

For some examples of labor activism in Detroit, Chicago and other industrial cities in the Midwest during the 1920's, see Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 155-158; in San Antonio, see Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 37, 55-81, and in El Paso, Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 96-106.

22. See Acuna, *Occupied America*, 209-220.

CHAPTER 4

1. Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 13; Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks", and the Farm Labor Problem*, 116.

2. Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 12. See also Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 127, 141-43.

3. Based on daily wages of \$0.80 to \$1 in the 1920's in Texas cotton ranches. See Foley, *The White Scourge*, 130.

4. In his report on "Northern Sugar Beet Workers", Edson recorded the price of some food items sold to the workers by the farmer in bulk quantities. See NOR, 7-10. My calculations are based on these prices. They also assume that the prices the laborers paid for beans, corn, sugar, rice and other staples in Texas were slightly lower in Texas than in the northern states.

5. NOR 7-10.

6. NOR, 13.

7. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 64.
8. NCS, 12-13; CW, 4.
9. United States Congress. House. Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Hearings: Seasonal Agricultural Labor from Mexico, 1926, pp 188-89.
10. CW, 1.
11. Oversupply of unskilled labor and the absence of intervention by the Federal Government to regulate minimum wages contributed to maintain earnings of Mexican farm hands in Texas and in the norther states, during the 1910's and 1920's, at levels of poverty and destitution. The oversupply was fueled by political and economic factors in both Mexico and the United States. For a review of these events, see Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 39-56.
12. Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 18.
13. For more on the Border Patrol, established in 1924, see Quinones, *Mexican Immigration to the United States*, 23-24. Quinones explains how the introduction of the Border Patrol changed the status of many Mexican immigrant workers to that of fugitives of the law. For more detailed review of the working conditions of Mexican laborers in the Texas cotton ranches in the 1920's, see Foley, *The White Scourge*, 122-24 and Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 24, 31-40.
14. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier*, 113, 133, 137-138.
15. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 123-127.
16. NCS, 15.
17. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 130.
18. Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 213. Zamora outlines a comparison of daily wages paid to Mexican workers in the Lone Star State, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, for several skilled and unskilled occupations.
19. NCS, 5.
20. Mark Reisler, Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant During the 1920's, in David G. Gutierrez, ed., *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 29.
21. Ruth A. Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Bureau of Research in Social Sciences, 1941), 113.
22. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 64-140. See also Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 35: In 1920, wanting to convince some of his colleagues in Congress that continued Mexican immigration made economic sense, Texas Congressman explained that the Mexican worker was "specially fitted for the burdensome task of bending his back to picking the cotton and the burdensome task of grubbing the fields".
23. See Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 38-39, 97-98, 131-132. See also Zamora, Emilio, *El Movimiento Obrero Mexicano en el Sur de Texas, 1900-1920* (Mexico D.F.: Editorial Frontera, 1985), 34-55. Similarly discriminatory conditions are described in Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 6, 127, 231.
24. NCS, 24.
25. J.F. Thaden, *Migratory Beet Workers in Michigan*. Agricultural Experimental Station of Michigan State College, Special Bulletin 312, p. 2. State Archives of Michigan, Lansing, Michigan, RG 65-51, Box 1, Folder 22.

26. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Revised Edition. (New York: Verso 1991), 19-95.
27. NOR, 6-7; NCS, 20.
28. NCS, 21.
29. NOR, 14.
30. NOR, 12.
31. CW, 11.
32. Ibid.
33. However, farmers were quick to point out that Mexicans were also like other immigrants in their propensity to adjust their expectations to the new possibilities for improving their condition. See Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, 35.
34. NOR, 6.
35. CW, 9.
36. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), 104-5.
37. CW, 9.
38. NOR, 15.
39. Ibid.
40. Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 86-124.
41. DET, 21.
42. Acuna, *Occupied America*, 202. Acuna asserts that from 500,000 to 600,000 Mexicans departed under coercion during the 1929-1939 period. For additional reference on the repatriation during the Great Depression, see George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser, editors, *Mexican Workers in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 33-66.

CONCLUSION

1. McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, 70.
2. Scruggs, 79.
3. NCS, 15; CW, 14; NOR, 3.
4. NOR, 6.
5. NCS, 16.
6. NOR, 6.
7. DET, 6.
8. NCS, 24.
9. DET, 6.
10. FLINT, 2.
11. Acuna, *Occupied America*, 165-166.
12. Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge. Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 63-86.
13. NCS, 20, 21; CW, 10; NOR, 7.
14. See DET, 5; PONT, 2; and FLINT, 3.
15. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121-165.

16. NOR, 7.

17. NCS, 23.

18. Ibid.

19. NOR, 7.

20. NOR, 15.

21. NOR, 16.

22. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*. Cohen argues that workers, badly divided along racial and ethnic lines in the 1920's, forged a common working class culture in the 1930's. Their lives in the 1920's had been circumscribed by ethnicity and marked by political apathy and reliance on ethnic communities. In the 1930's, transcending their race and ethnicity, the workers succeeded in uniting to form unions and in actively supporting the Democratic administration. Did Mexican workers, at least those in industrial centers, participate in these working class alliances in the 1930's? More research is needed on this matter.

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