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LATINOS ALONG THE PLATTE: THE HISPANIC EXPERIENCE IN CENTRAL NEBRASKA

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ABSTRACT—This essay examines the arrival and growth of Latino population, principally Mexican American, into the Platte River valley region of Nebraska from 1890 to 1996. It outlines the history of the push and pull factors of immigration from Mexico and the various phases and characteristics of Latino settlement in the Midwest generally and in Nebraska specifically. It reviews demographic patterns over the 20th century and concludes with observations based upon census projections that indicate that the Nebraska Latino community will become the state's primary minority community by 2025.

KEY WORDS: Nebraska, Census, Mexican American, Platte River valley, sugar beets, meatpacking, immigration, urbanization

Introduction

In a 1996 study entitled "Latinos in Nebraska: A Socio-Historical Profile," Refugio Rochín and Marcelo Siles of the Julian Samora Research Institute offered a brief sketch of the history of Latinos in Nebraska followed by a detailed analysis of social and census information from 1980 through 1990. In their historical discussion they make the following observation (Rochin and Siles 1996):

Exactly why and how Latinos settled in Nebraska is not clear. Nor do we know what processes and institutions contributed to Latino growth in Nebraska. In general, reports of Nebraska's Latinos are anecdotal and not very analytical. They do not explain the social history and patterns of settlement of this population. It appears, however, that Mexican Americans were especially drawn to the Platte Valley, where the greatest opportunities for field labor and railroad employment have traditionally been found. (Rochin and Siles 1996:4-5)

This essay is a demographic and historical study of the Latino presence in central Nebraska and particularly the Platte River valley. The study is based on census data and published materials focusing on 45 counties of the central Nebraska region. I analyze some general themes for Nebraska within the context of research on the Latino, Mexican, and Mexican American experience in the larger Midwest. I suggest some tentative conclusions with regard to the social history and patterns of Latino settlement in Nebraska in general and the Platte Valley region specifically.

The term "Latino" can take on a variety of meanings, but for Nebraska and the Midwest, it predominantly refers to persons of Mexican origin or heritage. As reflected in a 1995 census report of the Hispanic population of the United States, the largest ethnic subdivision was Mexican American, accounting for 60% of the total Hispanic population at the time of the report (US Bureau of Census 1995). This characterization was even more distinct for Nebraska, where the Mexican American population has traditionally comprised an average of 80% of the Nebraska Hispanic population (Rochin and Siles 1996). Consequently, for Nebraska the contemporary and historic terminology of Hispanic and Mexican American are most appropriate and are used interchangeably.

The first Hispanics in central Nebraska were in all probability members of the ill-fated Villasur expedition of 1720 sent north by the Spanish crown from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to counter French incursions along the Platte River valley. Following a surprise attack by Pawnee, possibly encouraged by French agents, the survivors retreated back to the Southwest. (Thomas 1935; Nasatir 1952; Olsen 1966; Allen 1993). No Hispanics remained to settle along the Platte, and from 1720 to 1900 relatively few Hispanics would make their way into central Nebraska.

The Platte River valley, the heart of Major Stephen Long's great "American Desert," did not remain unpopulated for long. The waterway first served as a conduit for other, non-Hispanic populations traveling west along the Oregon Trail and the Mormon Trail. While at first relatively few chose to settle along the Platte, soon new political and economic factors appeared to provide reasons to settle the valley. In 1854 Nebraska was formally accorded the status of a territory, with a population recorded as a slight 4,494 citizens. By 1860 the population reached 28,841. In 1862 the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act initiated a series of developments that would transform the "desert" into a productive agricultural region that further attracted settlers, and when Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867, her population was estimated at 50,000. Over the rest of the 19th

century, railroads, corn, cattle, meatpacking, and sugar beet production combined to provide an effective catalyst for continued population growth, which would total over 1 million residents in Nebraska by 1900 (Olson 1966).

In August of 1866 the Union Pacific Railroad reached Kearney and by the end of the year had built through North Platte. The Burlington Railroad joined up at Kearney in 1872 and extended through the Republican Valley to Benkelman. The St. Joseph and Denver line reached Hastings by 1872 and proceeded on to Grand Island. The emergence of this rail network in the Platte River valley prompted other significant events. Seeking to raise funds from real estate granted to them by federal law, the railroads, and the towns they created along their routes, promoted the virtues of settlement in central Nebraska. In relatively short order, communities like Gibbon and Plum Creek (Lexington) welcomed “colonies” of homesteaders from the eastern United States, England, and northern Europe. Many of these homesteaders began growing corn, wheat, and other crops that would make Nebraska a major agricultural state by 1900. Overall agricultural production tripled from 1880 to 1900 as Nebraska became the fourth largest producer of corn in the nation (Olson 1966; Dick 1975; Czaplewski 1989).

The railroads also served as a catalyst for ranching and meatpacking. In 1870 the town of Schuyler became central Nebraska’s first cattle boomtown, shipping over 40,000 head of cattle east. Following the rails as they spread west, Kearney enjoyed a short-lived cattle boom in 1871, before the cattle-shipping center finally anchored itself in Ogallala in 1874. By 1876, more than 100,000 cattle were being shipped to market from central and western Nebraska. By 1880 that number rose to 758,000 and at the start of the 20th century over 2 million cattle were bound for the market each year. With this volume of production it is not surprising that the meatpacking industry soon emerged as a major component of the state’s manufacturing base. From 1884 through 1898 six major meat-processing plants opened in Omaha. The Union Stockyards Company (1894), Hammond Company (1885), Anglo-American Provision Company (1885), Cudahy (1890), Swift and Company (1888), and Armor Company (1898) represented more than a quarter of all the industry in the state and contributed to the Omaha boom of the late 19th century. From 1880 to 1900 Omaha grew from a town of 30,000 to a major city of over 120,000 (Olson 1966).

Another significant industry prompted by the presence of the railroad was the harvesting and processing of sugar beets. Introduced to the United States in 1830, the first successful sugar beet factory was established in

California in 1879. That success inspired local interest in central Nebraska and in 1890 the American Sugar Beet Factory began operations in Grand Island. A year later the company opened a second factory in Norfolk. In 1899 the Standard Beet Company opened a third factory in Ames. By 1899 approximately 9,000 acres of sugar beets were contracted for the factories in Norfolk and Grand Island. Growing and harvesting sugar beets was a labor-intensive operation, and originally Japanese and Russian Germans made up the majority of the labor force (Anderson 1937; Dick 1975; Grajeda 1976; Valdés 1990).

By 1900 the basic economic elements that would “pull” immigration into Nebraska were in place: the railroads, cattle production and meatpacking, general agriculture, and specifically sugar beet production and processing. This package of economic incentives would remain constant over the course of the 20th century. However, while these incentives proved effective for Americans from the east, Europeans and some Asians, they would not prove an effective draw for Hispanics until the occurrence of a significant “push” factor south of the border. For the first decade of the century relatively few Hispanics appear in the formal census of the state. The entire Hispanic population in Nebraska for 1890 is grouped within the category “Other.” Whatever “Other” represents, it disappears by 1900. In the first census of the new century “Mexican” is curiously included in the category of “Foreign White Stock; by Nationality.” It is the only Hispanic category used. This census reports only 20 Mexicans in Nebraska. By the 1910 census, the number increases to only 318 for the entire state (Wheeler 1975).

Over the 20th century the history of the Hispanic presence along the Platte, and across Nebraska generally, would change dramatically. Similar to the rise and fall of the Platte itself, the dynamics of Mexican emigration and immigration present a pattern of growth, decline, restoration, and dramatic expansion. Over the decades a distinct demographic pattern of settlement emerged, as well a social history that is just beginning to get the scholarly attention it deserves.

During the first phase of Hispanic presence along the Platte, from 1910 through 1932, or from the Mexican Revolution to the Great Depression, a permanent Mexican foundation was established in Nebraska. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was the initial catalyst that prompted the first wave of Mexican immigration to Nebraska. This catastrophic national upheaval kept Mexico in turmoil for a decade. Not surprisingly, many Mexicans fled the chaos by heading north. From 1910 to 1920 the Hispanic population of

Nebraska, almost exclusively Mexican, rose almost eightfold, from 318 to 2,436. Although the revolution finally abated by 1920, a Mexico-Nebraska link was solidly established. During the 1920s the Hispanic population dramatically increased once again, nearly tripling to a population of 6,321 by 1930 (Grajeda 1976; Smith 1981). Nebraska would become a destination for many Mexicans due to two significant industries—the railroad and sugar beet industry.

With regard to railroads, two key developments explain the role they play. First, US-built railroads were one of the proud accomplishments of the old regime in Mexico (Merger and Sherman, 1995). At the outbreak of the revolution this infrastructure not only served the military needs of the contending factions but also provided an avenue of departure from the chaos for many Mexicans in the *bajío* region of central and western Mexico, far from easy access to the international border (Rosales 1976, 1999). Mexicans close to the borders of Texas and the US Southwest were not dependent upon rail lines and easily found their way into the border states. Mexicans further to the interior relied upon the rails to leave Mexico, and in the process they also followed the rails to destinations beyond the border and into the Midwest (Rosales 1976). From El Paso, Eagle Pass, and primarily from Laredo, they headed north for jobs clearing mesquite and cactus from Texas farmland and to work the cotton fields in both Texas and Oklahoma (Vargas 1993; Valdes 2000). By the 1920s an estimated 80% of the Mexicans of the midwestern “colonia” communities were from central Mexico, and the rails had carried them into the Great Plains, including Nebraska (Rosales 1999).

A second and reinforcing development was the economic opportunity of working for the railroads across the Midwest and specifically in Nebraska. Nineteenth-century rail lines needed to be replaced, upgraded, expanded, and required constant repair. In Nebraska, in addition to upkeep, over 2,000 miles of new track were added to the state network from 1900 through 1910 (Olsen 1966). Railroad companies were already active in the business of recruiting Mexican labor for section crews and labor gangs. In El Paso labor recruiters for six companies averaged an estimated 2,000 laborers per month from 1900 to 1912, and by 1928 the Santa Fe Railroad Company alone maintained a total of 14,300 Mexican employees. Because the annual turnover rate often surpassed 100%, the demand for Mexican labor in the Midwest remained constant (Grajeda 1976; Smith 1981).

Racism combined with factors of economic expansion to maintain the demand for immigrating Mexicans. Zaragosa Vargas (1993) offers one of

the best explanations of these dynamics in his analysis of this Mexican labor in the Midwest:

Just as they had taken on Irish, Chinese, Japanese, and Greek workers a half century earlier, railroad companies aggressively recruited Mexicans for track work because native-born Americans, the “buckwheats,” unless desperate, generally refused this physically demanding and low-paying labor. They enjoyed better wage opportunities because the concentration of a black and ethnic labor force in certain jobs degraded this work. Nativism . . . made track maintenance and repair the work realm of Mexicans, the recent immigrant arrivals. It was their turn to do the work considered fit for “lesser breeds.” (Vargas 1993:34-35).

Early recruitment focused on young, single men, who labored at ballasting, laying ties, and pick-and-shovel work. They lived alongside the tracks in tent camps or in dilapidated boxcars. As workers settled in, and management determined it was worthwhile to encourage a more permanent workforce, wives and family were often sent for, and the boxcar “colonias” took on more substantial characteristics. Porches, fences, vegetable gardens, small shops, and even makeshift movie houses highlighted these Mexican communities that began to dot the landscape of the Midwest (Vargas 1993).

For Nebraska, it appears that early rail workers arrived in Omaha around 1909-10, brought in by Burlington and the Union Pacific Railroads (Valdés 2000). For the entire state, a detailed survey in 1927 calculated 10,000 Mexican rail workers in the Great Plains region, suggesting a possible workforce of over 1,500 for Nebraska alone (Valdés 2000). Within the Platte Valley, the community of Hershey recorded 19 families of Mexican origin in the late 1920s. From among those families the case of Louis and Micaela Martinez parallels the general pattern. They were both born in the *bajío* in the late 1890s and were married in 1914 in their hometown of Leon, Guanajuato. They traveled by rail to El Paso and then to Hershey in 1918, where Louis found employment with the Union Pacific Railroad (Nielsen 1993). If the generalization offered for the Plains states as a whole holds true, Mexican workers not only dominated the railroad labor pool but also, according to one scholar, “[u]ltimately developed a virtual monopoly over track maintenance operations” (Smith 1981:243).

After railroads, an equally dramatic expansion of agricultural production in sugar beets offered a second potent economic incentive for Hispanics to migrate to the Midwest and specifically to Nebraska. Prior to the protective sugar tariff of 1897, sugar beet production in the Midwest remained insignificant. With higher prices following the Dingley Tariff, sugar beet production grew dramatically (McWilliams 1948). The Great Plains quickly led the nation in sugar beet production. Major growing areas emerged in the North and the South Platte River valleys, extending from Colorado and Wyoming into Nebraska. Additional acreage then developed in Kansas and Montana. Sugar production in the region rose dramatically, from nearly 70,000 tons in 1899 to 4.5 million tons by 1929 (Valdés 1990).

As noted above, central Nebraska was one of the initial sites for sugar beet production in the Great Plains with the American Sugar Beet company setting up operations in Grand Island in 1890 and Standard Beet Company in Ames in 1899. In 1905 the counties of central Nebraska harvested over 9,000 acres of sugar beets for processing in Grand Island, Norfolk, and Ames. At that time only 250 acres of sugar beets were harvested along the North Platte. By 1930 this picture changed completely. As the Burlington line extended into the North Platte Valley, a shift in location and an expansion of production occurred in the sugar beet industry. In the spring of 1908 the Great Western Sugar Company began raising beets along the North Platte to send to processing plants in Colorado. However, by 1910 harvests in Scotts Bluff, Morrill, and Garden Counties proved sufficiently bountiful for the company to relocate the Ames plant to the town of Scottsbluff. By 1933 Nebraska sugar beet production topped 88,000 acres, and five more processing plants were operating in Scotts Bluff and Morrill Counties. Central Nebraska would continue to harvest over 10,000 acres of beets, but the vast majority of the crop was now grown in the western North Platte Valley, which also reigned as the processing center for the state. By 1932 Nebraska was the second largest producer of sugar beets in the nation (Anderson 1937; McWilliams 1948; Dick 1975; Grajeda 1976).

The sugar beet growing season began in late February or early March and continued until early summer. Harvesting began in late September and ran through November. Beet workers were assigned between 20 and 30 acres to care for. From planting to harvest, sugar beet work was labor intensive, generally requiring 10 to 12 hours of work six days a week. By 1927 the average wage was \$23 to \$24 per acre. Between operations during the summer break, workers had to seek temporary jobs elsewhere (Smith 1981; Vargas 1993).

The major challenge to the industry was to recruit and maintain a labor force. In this effort to establish what one author called an “agricultural proletariat” (Valdés 2000:50), corporate employment policy evolved through two distinct stages that significantly defined the history of Mexicans in Nebraska and the Midwest (Valdés 1990, 2000).

The first stage was an effort to copy the earlier experiences of meeting labor needs with European immigrant population. As one author put it (Valdés 1990),

At the turn of the century they [the companies] had two nearby sources of labor available—Germans from Russia to the east and United States citizens of Mexican descent to the south. They chose the former. (Valdés 1990:111)

In Nebraska and Colorado, Volga Germans from Omaha, Lincoln, and Denver were induced to the beet fields. The companies promised cheap tracts of land near the fields and bonuses in advance to pay for transportation, tools, and supplies. The companies often built homes for prospective tenants, offered technical advice on planting and cultivation, and even advanced long-term loans to secure tenants’ land and homes. As labor requirements grew, companies even imported Japanese labor from California to meet the need (Valdés 1990). These efforts failed for two reasons. Many of the immigrants soon became landowners in their own right and left the company fields, and, while some early Japanese were able to buy farms, growing anti-Asian sentiment in the United States cut off Japanese immigration and prohibited landowning, inducing many Japanese to leave the United States.

In Minatare, NE, the Russian German immigrants originally recruited to work the Great Western fields owned most of the land south of the city by the early 1920s (Valdés 1990). In Hershey, NE, as described in the town’s centenary history (Nielsen 1993),

First the Swedes either homesteaded or bought the land and hired German-Russian families, mostly from an area along Salt Creek in Lincoln called the Russian Bottoms, to work in the beet fields. Some of the thrifty Germans saved enough money to either rent or buy their own farms and hired the Japanese families to work the fields. Soon, they too were renting and owning small farms and bringing in new people by hiring Mexican families and Mexican Nationals to do the heavy hand work necessary to harvest a crop of beets. (Nielsen 1993:77)

Sugar beet companies now turned to a second strategy to build a labor force. They turned to Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants (*braceros*) to build their employee base. Recruiters were sent to Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to recruit locals and immigrants and transport them north to the beet fields. In 1915 the Great Western Sugar Company recruited and transported 500 workers to its Great Plains fields. By 1920 the figure jumped to more than 13,000 (Grajeda 1976). During the war years the companies lobbied for and obtained an exemption from the 1917 Immigration Act that allowed companies to hire temporary Mexican immigrant labor (*braceros*) on condition that they guarantee the workers' return. Following the war, the passage of legislation limiting European immigration increased Mexican recruitment. In 1926 Great Western transported 14,500 workers to its fields and employed 55 labor agents along the Rio Grande. Overall, from 1920 through 1930 Great Western alone contracted with employment agencies to recruit 96,414 workers or an average of 8,765 men per year. By 1929 a total of nearly 30,000 Mexicans and their families were working the sugar beet fields of the Great Plains states (Anderson 1937; Grajeda 1976; Vargas 1993; Valdés 2000). Most of these *betabeleros* were employed in Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado, but a significant number also arrived in Nebraska. For the counties of Scotts Bluff, Morrill, Garden, and Keith, the registered Mexican population increased from a total of 405 in 1920 to 2,974 by 1930 (Anderson 1937; Grajeda 1976; Smith 1981).

By 1930 a clear demographic pattern of Hispanic population in Nebraska was evident. It appeared in a barbell shape, weighted at one end by Scotts Bluff and Morrill counties in the west and by Sarpy and Lancaster counties in the east. While sugar beet prosperity was building the Hispanic population in the west, the meatpacking industries and rail yards of Omaha and Lincoln underwrote the growth of Hispanic population in the east, where Mexican American population rose from 849 in 1920 to 1,570 by 1930 (Grajeda 1976; Smith 1981).

Along the Platte River valley, in the counties of Merrick, Hall, Buffalo, Dawson, and Lincoln, the Hispanic population increased from 417 in 1920 to 936 by 1930. Reflecting its proximity to and participation in the sugar beet industry, Lincoln County experienced the greatest Hispanic presence, with 292 Mexicans registered in the 1920 census and 557 in the 1930 census. The other area of concentration for central Nebraska was in Hall County, around Grand Island, where the rail hub, local industry, and residual population from the early sugar beet activity accounted for 63 Mexicans in 1920 and 151 by 1930. Overall, for the entire state of Nebraska the

total count of Hispanics for 1920, defined solely as Mexicans, was 2,436, a significant increase from the 318 of 1910. By 1930 the total Hispanic population for the state nearly tripled to 6,321. For the 44 counties that comprised all of central Nebraska the Hispanic population for 1920 was 731 and for 1930 was 1,274. While these totals represented only 30% and 20% of the total state population of Hispanics in those years, the comparative increase was equivalent. The central Nebraska Hispanic population reflected in equal proportion the degree of change of that population for the entire state (US Bureau of Census 1996).

Other sectors of Nebraska's agricultural community suffered from the fall of commodity prices World War I, casting the 1920s as early depression years for heavily mortgaged farmers, but the success of the corporate sugar beet industry and its intimate association with the railroads provided not only a draw for immigration over that decade but a degree of economic security for many Mexicans in the coming Great Depression (Olson 1966).

With the sharp downturn of the US economy in the late 1920s, Mexicans faced growing pressures to return to Mexico or repatriate. Across the nation, as Anglo-American communities struggled and government relief became important for survival, opinion turned against Mexican immigrant labor. Beneath a national banner to "Hire American," a regressive European-American labor force now returned to claim low-end jobs. The Congress made undocumented entry into the United States a felony and increased the cost of obtaining citizenship. Thousands of Mexicans responded by voluntarily heading south (Valdés 2000). In 1930 formal repatriation campaigns were initiated across the United States at the national and local levels. The federal government restricted the issuance of visas, and in some states like California, forced deportations of thousands of Mexicans took place. Relief agencies and charities paid the railroad fare for "voluntary repatriation" of Mexicans, pressuring departures that often confused and intermingled immigrant labor with Mexican American citizens. The federal programs ceased with the Democratic victory of 1932, but repatriation at state and local levels continued throughout the decade, averaging an estimated 50,000 or more Mexicans a year departing the United States for a total of over 450,000 by 1940 (Hoffman 1974; Grajeda 1976; Kiser and Silverman 1979).

Not surprisingly, the depression decade marked an apparent sharp decline in the Mexican presence in Nebraska and specifically along the Platte. Nebraska figures seem to reflect the larger picture, but much more research on this era and topic is necessary in order to gain a more accurate

picture for the state. In terms of the census figures, it is clear that by the 1940 census the Hispanic population for the state had fallen from over 6,000 to 1,846. Similarly, for the Platte Valley region the 1940 figures show a reported decrease of Hispanics from 1,274 to 419 (US Bureau of Census 1940).

The lower figures may correctly indicate the curtailment of immigrant workers into Nebraska, but there are some indications that the decade of the 1930s was not so harsh on all Hispanics and that their position within the railroad and sugar beet industry provided some security and may have cloaked some of the Hispanic numbers. An account of the history of Mexican Americans in Hershey, NE, raises some intriguing questions. Throughout the 1920s, some 19 Hispanic families established themselves in this community. Working both the beet fields and the railroad, these families enjoyed prosperity up to the droughts of 1934 and 1935. In the midst of this hardship they were then able to contract with the Great Western Sugar Company to ship out to work the fields in other states and then return to Hershey. Railroad work continued apace and the companies often furnished basic, if crude, housing, as well as fuel. When fieldwork remained light, families often spent an entire year with a farmer, receiving basic housing in exchange for labor. In the community, merchants provided credit for basic commodities. These 19 families apparently remained in Hershey and served as the foundation for a significant Hispanic presence in this central Nebraska town (Neilsen 1993; Nelson 1997). Consequently, although census figures decrease, some of that drop may be due to internal migration and not a permanent loss of Hispanic population. This local experience also parallels patterns discovered by Dionicio Nodín Valdés for the upper Midwest. Valdés (Valdés 2000) found that

Repatriation tended to remove the least rooted, disproportionately male population, as families had more opportunities to continue working in the sugar beet fields. . . . Another consequence of repatriation was a greater gender balance and family stability among those who remained, and an increasing importance of children in Mexican communities. By 1933 local populations were stabilizing, and by the later 1930s they were again growing rapidly. (Valdés 2000:126)

In the early 1940s local and national policy would reverse direction, changing from repatriation to recruitment of Mexicans. The new war

economy needed both agricultural and industrial workers. In August 1942, Mexico and the United States negotiated the Mexican Farm Labor Supply Program (MFLSP), or *Bracero* program, to allow employers in the United States to contract for seasonal labor. Under this accord, an average of 62,000 Mexican workers a year entered the United States from 1942 through 1947. As the demographic statistics indicate, this program would introduce over 300,000 Mexican workers into the United States, but it apparently had little impact on Nebraska in the initial years. Total Hispanic population in the state remained static from 1940 to 1950, increasing by only 5 persons, from 1,846 to 1,851. For central Nebraska the increase in Hispanics was a bit more, 419 to 455, but the totals remained low. The apparent reason for this was twofold. First, the greatest labor demand was from the West Coast and, consequently, *bracero* labor was directed almost exclusively to Arizona, California, and the Northwest. The second reason was anchored in racism. As a result of Mexican complaints of overt discrimination against Mexicans in Texas, the Mexican government prohibited her workers from going to that state. As Texas traditionally served as the initial transfer point for Hispanics making their way to Kansas and Nebraska, the exclusion of Texas from the *bracero* program of 1942-47 may account for Nebraska's low figures (Scruggs 1979; Garcia 1980).

It is not clear if factors specific to Nebraska also account for the static numbers of Mexican immigrants over these years. It is reported that Immigration & Naturalization Service agents throughout the Midwest staged local deportation actions following World War II, and that as American nationalism emerged in the cold war atmosphere, Mexicans who were born and reared in the Midwest found themselves under increasing suspicion and the target of racial slurs such as "greasers," "spics," or "wetbacks." (Valdés 2000:162-63). One account that does make reference to Nebraska in this era indicates the possibility that the racial overtones also existed along the Platte (Grajeda 1976):

A woman, for example, tells about how during the Second World War, immigration authorities arrived at her house one day and belligerently questioned her status as a legal resident of this country, and threatened to deport her back to Mexico. "Send me back," she told the authorities, "I will go. But send my son back with me. Right now he is fighting in the war." Such experiences appear to be common among the Mexican people of this state. (Grajeda 1976:68)

As initially constituted in the 1940s, the *bracero* program had little apparent effect in Nebraska. However, the continuation of the guest worker program in a modified format would have a more substantial impact and would account in large part for a new wave of Hispanic population growth in Nebraska.

From 1947 to 1951 the federal government allowed employers to recruit contract labor on an individual basis. Reacting to complaints from Mexico that her citizens were not being fairly treated and that contracts were not being enforced, Congress then passed Public Law 78 in 1951. This legislation gave the secretary of labor authority and responsibility to monitor and regulate contract labor. The law was regularly renewed from 1953 through 1965. Over this entire period an estimated 4 million Mexicans legally contracted for work in the Southwest, the West Coast, and in the upper Midwest industrial regions of Michigan and Illinois. An estimated equal number of undocumented immigrants also entered the US labor pool. Over the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, both legal and illegal Mexican labor continued to enter the United States in significant numbers. Some of these Hispanic workers found their way to Nebraska (Samora 1971; Hawley 1979; Garcia 1980; Aguilar Camin and Meyer 1994).

The 1950s through the late 1970s proved to be prosperous years for Nebraska. Mechanization and technical advancements in agriculture were coupled with rising commodity prices and federal policies that encouraged agricultural expansion on a foundation of cheap capital. This agricultural expansion served to attract some of the Mexican immigrant population to the state, but the overall impact of mechanization kept the numbers at moderate levels while maintaining the bar bell-shaped demographic pattern of Hispanic population.

Across the state, as corn remained an economic mainstay, new crops and a new irrigation system laid the foundation for a healthy economy. In Saunders, Cass, Sarpy, Dodge, and Burt Counties in the east, soybean production grew from a crop of 16,000 acres in 1950 to over 1.2 million acres by 1974. In Scotts Bluff, Box Butte, and Morrill Counties in the west, production of pinto beans and Great Northerns emerged as a new major crop alongside sugar beets. In central Nebraska, pivot irrigation grew from only 14 systems in 1965 to 1,827 systems by 1975, enhancing the productivity of that region. Also in central Nebraska, new hybrids of grain sorghum, or milo, resulted in increased harvests of this crop from 5 million bushels in 1954 to over 140 million bushels by 1974 (Searcy and Longwell 1964; Williams and Murfield 1976; Lonsdale 1977).

Abundant production of corn, milo, and alfalfa (the latter earning Cozad the title "Alfalfa Capital of the World") contributed to the growth of feedlots and livestock and poultry feed production in this region. Feed tonnage increased from 190,000 tons in 1950 to over 1.7 million tons by 1974. Across Nebraska the production of cattle tripled so that by 1974 the number of cattle totaled over 7.4 million head. The cattle, grain, and feedlot success was the foundation of the economic centerpiece in Omaha. From the mid-1950s through 1973 Omaha area meatpackers were responsible for about 80% of commercial cattle slaughter in the state and Omaha reigned as the nation's number one livestock market (Searcy and Longwell 1964; Williams and Murfield 1976; Lonsdale 1977; Hendee 1996).

Much of this statewide productivity resulted from technological advances and improvements in the state's infrastructure, particularly in the area of transportation. For the farm, this was the era of mechanization. By 1970 over half of sugar beet harvesting was done by machine, cutting the labor requirements more than 25%. Irrigation, hybridization, and chemical control of weeds kept the need for labor static while production expanded. The efficiencies of larger-scale production also affected the feedlot business. From 1962 to 1974 the number of feedlots declined from 24,000 to 14,970, while the volume of fed cattle increased nearly threefold, from 1.8 to 3.3 million. The statistics represented the replacement of small lots, that fed under 1,000 head by larger, more efficient units. The number of feedlots that fed over 1,000 head increased from 312 to 460. Finally, Interstate 80, the new economic artery of the state from Omaha to Scottsbluff, was constructed during the 1960s and completed early in the 1970s (Searcy and Longwell 1964; Williams and Murfield 1976; Lonsdale 1977; Creigh 1991; Olson and Naugle 1997).

The labor requirements of this economic growth proved sufficient to attract some Hispanic population back to the state, but the figures remained moderate, perhaps in large measure because of the mechanization of the sugar beet industry. In terms of the census figures, the Hispanic population for the state increased from a total of 1,851 in 1950 to 6,376 in 1960 and to 7,177 by 1970. While the numbers are relatively low, particularly in contrast to the national figures, they represented an increase in the Nebraska Hispanic population of over 380%, returning this population to predepression levels. For central Nebraska the jump is from 455 to 1,440, representing essentially the same percentage of change (US Bureau of Census 1970).

Why Nebraska did not attract larger numbers of Hispanic immigrants may also have been the result of Mexican economic prosperity and public

works from 1946 through 1976, an era sometimes referred to as the “Mexican Miracle.” During this era the construction of the Morelos Dam on the Colorado River and the Falcón Dam along the lower Rio Grande reclaimed over 1 million acres of land for agricultural cultivation. Mexican federal policies instigated a major land distribution of over 30 million acres, and new social programs provided social security for rural workers, rural electrification, expansion of national health and education programs, and price controls on basic commodities. This general prosperity was symbolically capped in 1974 with the discovery of oil reserves that made Mexico the world’s fourth largest exporter by 1981 (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1994; Meyer and Sherman 1995).

Where technological change had diminished labor opportunities in the sugar beet industry and Mexican successes lowered the “push” factor for immigration during the 1970s, in the decade of the 1980s a new technological shift would create new labor opportunities to draw Hispanic immigration, and a change in the Mexican economy would accelerate a “push” factor that would initiate an unprecedented increase in the Hispanic population in Nebraska.

When the 1980 census identified a jump of over 300% in Nebraska’s Hispanic population, it became clear that the expansion phase of this demographic group was well under way. Three factors combined in the period from 1975 through 1995 to increase the Hispanic population in Nebraska to record levels and set a trajectory for the future. The first was the transformation of the meatpacking industry, the second was the Mexican economic crisis of the 1980s, and the third was the US Immigration Control and Reform Act (ICRA) of 1986.

The first factor to impact the growth of the Hispanic population in Nebraska was the revolution in the meatpacking industry. Led by IBP, Inc. (Iowa Beef Processors) in 1970, the meatpacking industry left the big cities for the countryside and smaller rural towns. Pressured in the cities by unionization, rising wages, and community complaints about the industrial odor and transportation noise, the meatpacking companies relocated to smaller rural communities where they were closer to feedlots, could pay lower wages, and encountered fewer complaints from towns eager to gain jobs and tax revenues (Valdés 2000). In Nebraska, Omaha proved to be a classic example of this revolution. From the end of World War II through 1973, Omaha packers were responsible for 80% of the state’s cattle processing and employed over 13,000 workers. However, as a result of industry restructuring, by 1996 that market share fell to 13% and the three remaining

companies employed no more than 1,300 workers (Limprecht 1989; Peterson and Tinstman 1981; Hendee 1996).

The new packing giants, IBP, Monfort (Con Agra), and Excel (Cargill), built new plants in smaller communities across the state. In central Nebraska, IBP opened operations in Lexington and Columbus. Monfort moved into Grand Island and Excel began operations in Schuyler. While the initial impact of mechanization and efficiency temporarily lowered employment in the packing industry to 8,900 jobs in 1987, that trend was soon reversed. Nebraska labor statistics indicate that by 1992 that employment total nearly doubled, to 16,000, and increased again by 1996 to over 20,200 jobs. Hispanic labor, both from immigration and from internal relocation, provided the corporations with the inexpensive workforce they desired (Lamphear et al. 1991; Lamphear et al. 1992; Gouveia and Stull 1997; *Omaha World-Herald* 1997). Mexican immigrant and Mexican American labor comprised anywhere from 40% to 80% of the workforce at the new plants (Valdés 2000). The growing Mexican labor pool did not displace either a traditional labor pool or close opportunities for others. Employers were often unable to recruit enough workers locally. A story on the meatpacking transformation published in the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1992 reported that “[r]elatively low wages and physically taxing work have made meatpacking less attractive to locals. New immigrants have taken up the slack.” (Rasmussen 1992:21A) Echoing these sentiments, an official of Garden City, KS, asserted that “[t]he simple fact is that this is hard, tough work, and farm boys just didn’t want it” (Valdés 2000:226).

Alongside the transformation of the meatpacking industry, an economic crisis in Mexico and new immigration policies in the United States helped ensure that a significant number of Hispanics would find their way to the Great Plains and Nebraska.

In Mexico by 1982 it became clear that the days of petroleum prosperity were over. World oil production began to exceed demand and prices plummeted. No longer able to support a fixed exchange rate for the peso, the Mexican government allowed the value of the currency to be determined on the open market. The results were a disaster for the average Mexican. From 1982 through 1987 the exchange rate of the peso to the dollar grew from 25 to over 2,300. The inflation rate rose to 63% by 1985 and increased to over 159% by 1987. Over the course of the crisis most Mexicans would lose over half their savings and income as their real wages dropped by 40% to 50%. The hardships pushed many Mexicans northward, some of whom would seek salvation working in the meatpacking industry (Cornelius 1992; Aguilar Camin and Meyer 1994; Meyer and Sherman 1995).

The Mexican crisis and increased immigration pressures prompted the US Congress to respond in the form of the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act. The act was designed to curtail illegal immigration by strengthening interdiction and providing fines and criminal penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers. However, the act also provided for an amnesty for current undocumented workers and expanded the number of immigrant visas to allow in more legal seasonal workers. By June of 1988, more than 1.7 million aliens across the United States applied for amnesty and over half a million immigrants sought legal status for seasonal work. As a result of the ICRA, previously uncounted undocumented Hispanics now appeared in the census totals (*World Almanac and Book of Facts* 1989; Cornelius 1992).

National census figures demonstrate a substantial increase in the Hispanic population in the United States from 1970 to 1990. In terms of the general category of Hispanics, totals over the three decades jumped from 9.1 million to 14.6 million to 22.4 million, a three-year national increase of over 240% (McHugh 1989; US Bureau of Census 1993). With specific regard to the Midwest, Hispanic figures rose from slightly under 1 million in 1970 to 1.2 million in 1980, to 1.7 million in 1990. While the increase is modest in comparison to the national numbers, it represented a 70% increase in Hispanic presence in the Midwest (Estrada 1976; Rochín and Siles 1996).

For Nebraska the census figures from 1970 through 1996 parallel the dramatic national and regional change. In 1970 Nebraska Hispanics numbered 7,177. By the 1980 census that figure had grown to 28,025, an increase of nearly 300%. By 1990 the figure jumped to 36,969 and the 1996 projections totaled 63,294, or an increase of over 700% since 1970. Specifically for central Nebraska, the figures are equally dramatic while maintaining the same general percentage for the (Nebraska) state. The 1970 census reported 1,440 Hispanics; by 1980 that figure rose to 6,044 and by 1990 to 8,065. The 1996 projection estimated 13,913 Hispanics in central Nebraska. While the real numbers changed significantly over these decades, the proportion of this region's population to that of the state remained at 21%. Further projections for the turn of the 21st century set the Hispanic population of the state at 65,000 and the total for central Nebraska at 14,527 (Rochín and Siles 1996; US Bureau of Census 1996).

As the new century begins, two dramatic and mutually reinforcing factors are combining to ensure a future for Hispanics in Nebraska. Estimates of future internal and external Hispanic immigration patterns emphasize the growth of

Hispanic populations in midwestern urban environments, and Nebraska, contrary to appearances, has become predominantly urban.

Deborah Waller Meyers (1998) of the International Migration Policy Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently outlined the fundamental principles of international migration from Mexico. They encompass six basic characteristics. First, migration originates in structural transformations of sending and receiving countries. Second, migration, once begun, develops supporting social infrastructures. Third, families rapidly adopt migration as part of their strategies for survival. Fourth, migration quickly becomes a self-sustaining social process. Fifth, settlement of migrants within the receiving country is inevitable, and, sixth, networks are created and maintained by an ongoing process of return migration. The most distinct structural transformations that have occurred in terms of Hispanic immigration to Nebraska are the increasingly urban nature of those seeking to immigrate to the United States, and the urbanization of the state of Nebraska.

In a study on the changing profile of Mexican immigration into the United States, published in 1992, Wayne Cornelius found that in the late 20th century, Mexican fiscal problems were increasingly harming Mexican city dwellers, and he concluded that “[e]ven with a sustained economic recovery in the 1990s, we can anticipate that by the end of this decade the majority of new (first-time) Mexican immigrants to the United States will come from urban Mexico” (Cornelius 1992:164-65). Echoing this observation, a study by Robert Aponte and Marcelo Siles (1994) entitled “Latinos in the Heartland: The Browning of the Midwest” concluded that “[t]he most striking finding is that relatively few Latinos in the region are rural dwellers, despite the agricultural-labor origins of much Latino immigration” (Aponte and Siles 1994:11).

Paralleling this change has been the urbanization of Nebraska over the last half century. The 1950 census was the last census to report that the majority of the state population was rural. In that year 53.1% of the population was identified as rural, and 46.9% was classified as urban, that is, living in incorporated cities, villages, or towns, and other designated places of 2,500 or more persons. By the 1960 census the figures were reversed. In that census the rural population represented only 45.7% of the total, and the urban population represented 54.3% of the state. From 1960 to 1990 the rural population fell to 33.9% while the urban population grew to 66.1% (Rochín and Siles 1996; *Nebraska Statistical Handbook* 1997).

The urbanization of Nebraska is not just a phenomenon of the eastern corridor of Omaha and Lincoln. While the mechanization and consolidation of farming and the cattle industrial complex has kept Nebraska a leader in agricultural production, it has also led to the growth of urban "islands" across the state. The urban pattern is consistent across the state and particularly in central Nebraska. Ten of the 40 counties that comprise central Nebraska report populations that are over 50% urban, ranging from a low of 54% in York county to a high of 80% in Hall County. The urban counties account for 58.1% of all of the population of central Nebraska. The rural versus urban population growth rates for key counties of the central Nebraska region from 1960 through 1996 demonstrate this change. While Buffalo County grew by only 8% over these years, the city of Kearney experienced a 92% rate of growth. For Hall County, the rural population increased only 2%, while Grand Island expanded by 60%. Lincoln, Dawson, and Platte Counties actually lost rural population, indicating no county growth, while North Platte grew by 67%, Lexington by 80%, and Columbus by 67%. In addition, with reference to predictions of future Hispanic population growth being primarily urban, the 10 most urban counties of central Nebraska account for 86% of the Hispanic population of the region (*Nebraska Statistical Handbook* 1997). The urbanization of Nebraska was officially acknowledged on the front page of the *Omaha World-Herald* on 28 June 1998 in an article entitled "Nebraska Now an Urban Entity: Growth in Six Counties Reclassifies State as Not Rural."

This study has attempted to offer some prospective answers to the questions posed by Rochín and Siles at the beginning of this essay. It is clear from research on Hispanics in the Midwest, and the reports on census figures, that the dramatic increase in the Hispanic population for Nebraska will continue. An *Omaha World-Herald* headline in October 1996 reported, "Hispanic Growth Is Foreseen: Census Projects Them as No. 1 Minority in Nebraska by 2025" (Goodsell 1996). A followup story in September 1999, entitled "Hispanic Numbers Continue to Rise," repeated the theme (Gonzalez 1999).

Hispanics, principally Mexicans, will find themselves encouraged to immigrate as a result of difficulties in their home nation. Increasingly urban, they will find an increasingly urban Nebraska an attractive destination. With a foundation of Hispanic families and communities that stretch back nearly a century, the social infrastructure is in place to encourage and sustain such international migration. The new Hispanics will also find the Platte River valley and central Nebraska as urban and attractive a destination as any in

the state. If the census projections are accurate, over 100,000 Hispanics, primarily Mexicans, will live in Nebraska by 2025, and over 24,000 of these will embody the communities of the Latinos along the Platte.

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