Book Review: *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry* By Jim Norris

Maria S. Arbelaez
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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From its origins at the end of the 19th century, the American sugar beet industry has been linked to Mexican immigrant labor. Moreover, the painstaking job of thinning, topping, and harvesting the large and heavy beets became an almost entirely Mexican labor specialty by the turn of the 20th century. Betabeteros, as the Mexican and Mexican-American laborers were and are known, sojourned north from the borderlands to Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, South and North Dakota, Michigan, and Minnesota fields. In each of these states, the sugar beet industry willingly pursued immigrant labor to do the work while immigrant networks did much of the recruiting. At the same time, sugar beet production, in combination with railroad work, meat packing, construction, and other manual occupations, modified the demographic landscape of the Great Plains and Upper Midwest. The constant migratory movement eventually produced Mexican enclaves that dotted the region.

The seasonal nature of sugar beet farming and the hard manual labor it entailed created intricate relations among immigrants, growers, and industrial producers. This is precisely what Jim Norris addresses in his study of the sugar beet industry in the Red River Valley in North Dakota and Minnesota. Based on an in-depth review of the literature, archives, and interviews, Norris reconstructs the sugar beet history of the valley from the end of World War I until the 1970s, presenting along the way the complex history of the relationships among growers, sugar company, and labor.

The sugar beet enterprise in the Red River Valley grew, Norris argues, “out of necessity” as traditional wheat crops and flour mill profits plummeted at the end of World War I. As a remedy to economic difficulties, crop diversification was employed to alleviate farmers’ declining living standard. Persuaded by the successes of the sugar beet producers in Colorado and western Nebraska, and bolstered by an ever increasing domestic demand, the American Crystal Sugar Company was incorporated and contracts were signed with farmers to plant the beets. Labor, though, was much more difficult to obtain. The availability of field hands to perform the job was hardly adequate and challenged the growers and the company. In the very beginning, labor was provided by Russian, German, Polish, and Japanese immigrants together with farmers themselves and local teenagers. However, the grueling work demanded by the beet fields and the reluctance of Eastern Europeans and locals to engage permanently in such arduous labor with low wages made the company turn to Tejanos and Mexican nationals. The American Crystal Sugar Company, with the acquiescence of the growers, recruited Mexican and Tejano labor on the southeast borderland. And the sugar company created its own direct hiring agency. In reciprocal terms, Tejano and Mexican nationals had greater opportunity and expectations of jobs that were plentiful and better remunerated across the border.
The relationships among growers, company, and Tejano and Mexican laborers were not always smooth. There were serious differences, and often workers, company administrators, and growers clashed. Recruiting the labor force was a constant challenge for the receiving end in the valley. The 1929 economic depression hit the betabeleros hard, whether Mexican nationals or Mexican-Americans. Many were forced to repatriate as the economy struggled. Others moved around in search of jobs. In the same year, Texas passed restrictive laws concerning in-state labor recruiting. As a result, labor often had to be tapped from the immigrant work pools that had been progressively created in Midwest localities by those workers who, having tired of making the two annual trips, had decided to settle permanently. The working conditions, salaries, and living standards of the immigrants were far from satisfactory. Workers were alienated and poverty-stricken, and lived in ill-fitted dwellings. These conditions improved with time when rural, religious, and welfare organizations and unions intervened on behalf of the immigrants.

Undoubtedly, North for the Harvest is a sound history of the sugar beet industry of the Northern Plains and Upper Midwest. Norris’s documentation is solid and comprehensive. At the same time, his narrative style is fluid and engaging. Photographs of betabeleros, fields, immigrant families, housing in Texas and Minnesota, and industrial facilities enhance the research through vivid imagery. Furthermore, this book provides an illustration of the complex relationship between the success of American agroindustries and their dependence on cheap immigrant Mexican and Mexican-American labor. Maria S. Arbelaez, Department of History, University of Nebraska at Omaha.