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Dennis Nodín Valdés
University of Wisconsin

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SETTLERS, SOJOURNERS, AND PROLETARIANS

SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE GREAT PLAINS SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY, 1890-1940

DENNIS NODÍN VALDÉS

The sugar beet industry was in the forefront of the opening of the northern Great Plains to commercial agriculture. At the end of the nineteenth century, massive expanses of cheap land with ideal climatic and soil conditions were available on the Plains, but the sparse population afforded few farmers or field workers to block, thin, hoe, and top the sugar beets. Between 1890 and World War II, the sugar corporations devised three labor recruitment strategies that created classes of settlers, sojourners, and proletarians on the Great Plains. This essay examines the interaction between the sugar beet industry and its field workers on the northern Plains in the early twentieth century.

Dennis Nodín Valdés is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin, where he teaches in the fields of Chicano studies and history. He has published many articles on agricultural labor in the West.

BEGINNING OF AN INDUSTRY

The sugar beet industry had a hesitant start in the United States. Following a number of experiments in different locations, two factories were established in California: at Alvarado in 1870 and at Watsonville in 1888. A third factory was built in 1890 at Grand Island, Nebraska. The state gave its developers, the Oxnard brothers, land and a financial donation (or bonus) that it also granted to later factories in the region. These modest operations soon gave way to a flurry of investment. Stimulated by a sharp rise in national sugar consumption, investors had built more than one hundred factories in the United States by the mid-1920s.¹

The Great Plains states quickly led in national sugar beet production, as the industry took advantage of government-sponsored research and the construction of irrigation systems in the 1880s and 1890s. The major production zone appeared along the South Platte River valley, extending from northeastern Colorado into Nebraska, and the North Platte valley in northwestern Nebraska and eastern Wyoming. A second area of beet growing centered on the Arkansas River valley in southeastern Colorado and western Kansas. Additional zones of beet

production appeared along the Upper Yellowstone River valley in Montana and the Big Horn valley in Wyoming. In the five states, 95 percent of sugar beet tonnage was produced east of the Rocky Mountains. The region was one of the last frontiers of Euro-American settlement in the United States. The major beet growing counties in Colorado, Weld and Larimer, were only organized in the late 1880s. Scotts Bluff County, the leader in beet growing in Nebraska, had a population density of only 2.6 persons per square mile in 1880.² Because of the sparse settlement, the industry had to lure workers as well as farmers, and in the process it helped transform the human geography of the region.

Sugar production in the region rose from slightly less than seventy thousand tons in 1899 to 4.5 million tons in 1929. Colorado soon became the leading sugar beet growing state in the nation. In 1929 it produced 37 percent of the nation's beet sugar, while neighboring Nebraska accounted for an additional 14 percent. Three corporations quickly gained control of the sugar industry in the region—Great Western, American Beet Sugar, and Holly. By 1937 they owned thirty-four of the thirty-six factories on the northern Great Plains.³

The industry's major problem was to recruit and hold a field labor force. Its initial experiments focused on the flagship factory in Grand Island, Nebraska, during the early 1890s. The region already had settled farmers, so the company experimented with day laborers and other temporary workers. It imported Japanese laborers from California, where many of them had worked beets. At the same time it began recruiting Germans from Russia in Omaha and later in Lincoln, Denver, and other plains locations. Most of the Germans from Russia who became beet workers were descendants of German Protestants who had left their homeland in the late eighteenth century to settle in Russia, particularly along the Volga River. In the late nineteenth century, when the Russian government rescinded their military deferments and land acquisition became more difficult, many of these German-speaking people left for the United States, settling principally on the north-

ern Great Plains between 1890 and 1914. They provided the majority of settled farmers recruited by the beet industry.⁴

SETTLERS

As production expanded at the turn of the century, haphazard recruitment mechanisms were no longer adequate. The settled population near the eventual heart of the Great Plains beet growing region, along the North and South Platte rivers, was much more sparse than around Grand Island, while the demand for field labor was greater than before. With cheap land available, the sugar companies frequently purchased tracts of land near their factories and then recruited workers. At the turn of the century they 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, whom they lured with promises of settling and opportunities to purchase land soon after arrival. The companies often built homes for prospective tenants in the early years. In southern Colorado, Holly Sugar set up the Amity Land Company to sell irrigated land at 10 percent down and payment over seven years. The companies also advanced Russian-German tenants money to buy food and supplies, teams of horses, and other farm necessities. They provided tools and technology, advice on planting and cultivation, cheap rental, and easy terms of purchase. The European workers faced many problems in establishing themselves, including erratic weather, but during emergencies, including droughts, the companies frequently advanced special loans to the German-speaking worker-farmers to make sure that they did not lose their land and homes.⁵

Other inducements also made it possible for the early field workers to settle. The companies employed them in the higher-paying beet factories, affording extra months of income, a relative luxury seldom extended their successors. Furthermore, wages were very high during the first and second decades of the century. As a result, the Germans from Russia quickly purchased farms of their own, often within three

years. Originally recruited into the Arkansas Valley of Colorado as laborers in 1899, they owned a third of the properties in the district by 1909. In Minatare, Nebraska, the immigrants whom Great Western had originally recruited as workers owned most of the land south of the city by the early 1920s.⁶

The European immigrants who acquired lands in the beet districts did not remain isolated, as they had on the Volga. They quickly formed working-class neighborhoods in the beet towns, and although local Anglos referred to these neighborhoods as "Russiantown," "St. Petersburg," or "the Jungle," they were not segregated. Children, often despite the wishes of their parents, were compelled to attend English language schools with other Euro-American children. Furthermore, as they became land owners, Germans from Russia adopted the ways of other farmers and refused to perform stoop labor. For those who did not continue in agriculture, many quickly found employment as industrial workers, frequently rising to white collar positions. Their occupational mobility freed children for school, and attendance seldom was a significant problem among the European children after the earliest years of the century. Although they often built their own Protestant churches and formed a number of social and cultural organizations, they were gradually assimilated into the Euro-American culture of the Great Plains.⁷

The assimilation process was not easy. The achievement of economic success was hindered by erratic weather, droughts, and arduous working conditions as well as the problem of acceptance by Anglo-American society. Contemporary United States-born citizens had mixed attitudes toward the diverse group of German-speaking immigrants from Russia. Many citizens felt themselves superior and expressed contempt toward the foreigners. Particularly harsh feelings were directed toward the immigrants' tendency to work children hard and keep them out of school for the sake of short-run family economic improvement and toward the immigrants' "extreme thriftiness." Some attitudes were particularly harsh. National Sugar Company general manager J. H. Abel, upset with

rising maintenance costs for housing complained, "they are a lot of ignorant people who have to be treated as children and we are indeed fortunate in being able to keep our labor expense down." But other observers indicated that these negative stereotypes did not permanently handicap the Germans from Russia. Bertram Hautner and Lewis Abbot noted that "the Russian German is usually of the farm group. No social barrier is raised against him because of his ethnic group, and no physical characteristic, such as color, sets him off from the rest." By 1930, at least half of all Germans from Russia in Colorado were estimated to have become sugar beet farmers.⁸

A second group of settlers to be recruited were the Japanese. They represented a transition between settlers and sojourners. Many were initially recruited as single men to compete against the European families. Others were lured by the corporations to grow beets after they had already arrived in the sugar beet districts. Some came directly from California, while others came from work in nearby railroad gangs, coal mines, and smelters.⁹

Many of the Japanese were experienced farmers, and they had a keen knowledge of, and appreciation for, intensive agriculture. They soon brought their families and quickly became tenants. Although they were less numerous than the Germans from Russia, they became victims of a much sharper anti-foreign hostility than the Europeans. As a result of the rising national anti-Japanese sentiment by the middle of the decade, immigration from Japan soon was cut off and many states passed laws prohibiting the Japanese from purchasing land. While many were able to buy farms through their United States-born children, more left the area. A generation later many former Japanese beet workers still owned farms and grew beets in scattered locations in Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Montana.¹⁰

SOJOURNERS

The beet corporations also turned to Spanish-speaking workers, who appeared in the fields

of southern Colorado in 1900 and in northern Colorado by 1903. By the early 1910s they were employed in the beet growing zones of Nebraska, and they moved north as the beet culture spread into the Yellowstone and Big Horn river valleys. Unlike the Europeans and Japanese, the workers of Mexican descent were not encouraged to settle. They were hired as sojourners, to remain for the season and leave the area after beet topping ended.¹¹

The corporations adopted the sojourner strategy for the Spanish-speaking workers both as a means of keeping wages down and in response to Euro-American fears of settlement in their midst. Euro-Americans asserted that these workers were "not a land-acquiring people" because they had roots deep in the villages of northern New Mexico and migrated only to earn enough to sustain their communities in the south. The sojourner strategy applied only for the period before World War I when single men came without their families.¹²

The notion popularized by many observers, including historian Sarah Deutsch, that these workers came principally from the New Mexican villages is not accurate. The earliest recruitment of Mexicanos as sojourners took place in southern Colorado for employment in the nearby Arkansas River Valley. Recruitment for northern Colorado first took place from Trinidad and Dry Creek, Colorado. The companies also sent agents to Las Vegas and other villages in northern New Mexico. By 1909, recruitment extended not only to Las Vegas and the northern New Mexico villages, but also to Albuquerque and places farther south in New Mexico, and to Arizona and El Paso, where most of the workers recruited were born in Mexico. Many were small landowners who did seasonal migrant work to eke out survival, while others supplemented beet earnings with work as railroad section hands or in shops, coal mines, and foundries. Even in the first decade of the century, New Mexican villagers were a minority among the workers of Mexican-descent on the Great Plains, and over time, their proportion continued to decline.¹³

Many Euro-Americans argued that, unlike

Europeans and Japanese, Mexicans were natural sojourners who did not want to settle down and were further held back by "the mañana attitude," lack of ambition, and by being "notoriously improvident." The arguments were consistent with company efforts to rationalize why Mexicans, unlike Germans from Russia or Japanese workers, did not acquire land. They do not explain why the companies at this time hired Europeans as families but Mexicans as single men. Nor do they account for the intense hostility of Anglo residents to the initial arrival of Mexican workers in new towns and the fear that they might settle permanently. The arguments also contradict the tremendous company success in the 1920s in converting these same workers to permanent residents eager to purchase houses.¹⁴

PROLETARIANS

With the onset of World War I, the sugar beet industry faced a field labor crisis. Production expanded sharply, requiring more workers, but higher wages in competing industries drew immigrants out of the fields or enabled them to purchase and work their own farms. Consequently, the companies intensified recruitment in Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. Company recruiters set up agencies in border towns and even went into Ciudad Juarez and the Mexican interior to find workers. Mexican nationals were particularly attractive, as Francis Key Carey of National Sugar noted in 1917: "The advantage of getting labor from old Mexico is, of course, that it is under discipline and can't run away."¹⁵

As late as 1919, the companies hired Mexican *solos* (single men) as sojourners, but the new strategy focused on recruiting entire families for the fields. By 1922 Great Western officially stopped hiring single workers because families offered a more abundant and controllable labor supply. The corporations recruited families from established centers in southern Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. During the course of the 1920s, often with the help of the United States Employment Service,

they also turned to recently settled Mexican immigrants who worked in railroad and industrial centers on the Great Plains. While there was no sharp geographic distribution pattern distinguishing the old and New Mexicans, United States citizens were predominant in the beet colonies of southern Colorado, while Mexican citizens were concentrated in northeastern Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and Kansas. By the middle of the decade, families of Mexican immigrants dominated hand labor in the beet fields of the Great Plains.¹⁶

In an effort to reduce recruitment costs, the companies offered these families opportunities to settle in the towns of the beet sugar region but not, as had been the case with the Germans from Russia, on farms of their own. American Beet Sugar and Holly Sugar constructed housing and made it available to workers, who paid rent indirectly, as they received lower wages in exchange for housing. Those workers who remained in the sugar beet districts during the winter could rent the housing cheaply. Great Western, which dominated production in the region, also arranged for workers to construct and purchase houses on lots of their own. It furnished free straw, lime, sand, and gravel, and offered workers credit to purchase lumber, doors, and cement. Company employees also supervised the laying of walls and other phases of construction. These corporation strategies created permanent worker colonies of from ten or twenty to one hundred fifty families in almost every factory district of Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. More than one hundred of these settlements were constructed in the region by 1927. The sugar beet companies established the colonias "primarily for the purpose of building up a local labor supply," "to keep their workers from being drawn away" by competition, and to allay Euro-American perceptions that beet workers were a welfare burden on the community. Apparently the companies considered the colony cheaper than migrant labor.¹⁷

The contrasting fates of European and Mexican workers were partly the consequence of decreasing earnings. Income between 1900,

when Germans from Russia first came, and 1920, when Mexicans began to dominate the region, had already fallen sharply. Wages continued to slide, and were halved again by the nadir of the Depression in the mid-1930s. As a result the gap between the Mexicans' wages and the cost of a farm or even the equipment to become a tenant was too great for the Mexicans to advance in economic status. After many years in the region, very few Mexicans became renters and, as United States Department of Labor investigator George Edson reported in 1927, "none, so far as known, owns a farm." In contrast, Richard Sallet estimated that by 1910, "probably seventy-five percent of all the farms between Sterling and Denver were operated by Volga Germans."¹⁸

Mexican beet workers' settlement patterns on the Great Plains also differed sharply from those of their European counterparts. A first, relatively affluent, generation of Germans from Russia had arrived in the early 1870s. They were immediately able to purchase farms and even, according to Norman Saul, "fine horses hitched to the best Studebaker wagons." Their presence softened Euro-American antagonism toward later and poorer Germans from Russia. The later arrivals had to accept proletarian work in the mines, on the railroads, and in the beet fields. As laborers they, like the Mexicans, initially resided in slum districts near the beet fields, but most quickly moved to more stable and higher-paying employment in the rapidly growing cities and towns in the region, or to rent and eventually purchase farms. In towns and on farms they lived, worked, and socialized as equals among United States-born Euro-Americans. As Bertram Hautner and W. Lewis Abbott of the National Child Labor Committee concluded: "Russian-Germans are considered members of the community. . . . Spanish Americans and Mexicans are looked upon as outsiders."¹⁹

The contrast between the European farmers and the Mexican proletarian settlers extended to schooling. Children of the Germans from Russia missed classes because of the "beet vacation" and the refusal of parents to allow their children to attend, yet truant officers, teachers,

and principals fought vigorously, with varying degrees of success, on behalf of the children. With children of Mexican descent, school officials rarely tried to enforce attendance laws. As one truant officer admitted: "We never pretend to keep track of them." Furthermore, the corporations perfected the "beet vacation" for Mexican children, simply keeping the schools in the beet colonias closed until November, after beet topping was over. The school districts and employers could thus coordinate the demands of industry and school attendance without interrupting production.²⁰

THE FORMATION OF A CHICANO WORKING-CLASS CULTURE

Recent academic literature has offered two perspectives on the twentieth-century Chicano presence in the rural Great Plains beet country. Historical geographer Richard Nostrand acknowledges the many population clusters in rural northeastern Colorado and western Nebraska and recognizes that they have population densities equal to those of the Chicano "heartland," yet he finds no compelling reason to consider the people of the region within a broader context or to compare them to those of the Southwest. Historian Sarah Deutsch, on the other hand, posits a direct link between the old heartland in New Mexico, which she calls the homeland, and Colorado beet country. She suggests that during the early years of the twentieth century, villagers from northern New Mexico made a "cultural choice" to settle in the sugar beet growing zones of the Arkansas and South Platte river valleys. Modifying the world economy concept popularized by Emmanuel Wallerstein, she claims that a core Hispanic culture in the upper Rio Grande valley of New Mexico spread northward. In the late nineteenth century it formed what became a cultural semiperiphery in southern Colorado, and in the early twentieth century a periphery in the sugar beet fields of northern Colorado. The links between the cultural homeland and periphery remained weak. Ultimately, Deutsch argues, those ties were severed completely in the 1930s, as the core culture

of New Mexico failed to reproduce itself in the northern sugar beet fields. In effect, she also portrays the beet region in the negative, not as part of a broader Chicano culture.²¹

Both interpretations are flawed. Population density or cultural transmission from New Mexico did not determine the fate of Chicano communities on the Great Plains. Rather, the class struggle between the industry and its workers resulted in a distinct Chicano working-class culture, different from either New Mexico or Mexico. This discussion compares the fate of the Germans from Russia as settlers to the Mexicans as proletarians and seeks to establish a distinct niche for the Spanish-speaking people of the northern Great Plains.

Deutsch has suggested that the beet colonias and the adobe dwellings were not only an extension of the culture centered in the New Mexican heartland but that they "formed almost a mock miniature" of the "regional community" centered in the New Mexican heartland. Her interpretation has numerous flaws. Adobe houses were also common among the Germans from Russia who settled on the Great Plains and among Mexicanos in other parts of the Southwest and northern Mexico. More important, the new colonias functioned differently from the older independent villages of New Mexico. The beet-worker houses typically were two-room units built in neat rows, usually in small, tightly clustered colonias. They were preferred to wood dwellings for practical reasons—lower price, resistance to fire, greater protection from cold in the winter and heat in the summer, lower maintenance cost, and ease of construction and maintenance. Workers paid between one hundred twenty-five and two hundred dollars for a house over a period of four to five years. By the late 1920s, an estimated 10,000 families, a third of the field labor force in the region, lived in these worker colonias, proving that the corporations' policies in initiating them had been highly successful.²²

The companies also set up a "padrone system" in conjunction with local storekeepers. The merchant, who provided food, also offered credit, jobs, and transportation. The system

served, historian Augustine Redwine has observed, as "a credit trap" that further immobilized workers.²³

The villages of the south and the colonias of the north differed in other ways. The colonias, with very few old people, female-headed families, or members of the middle or old *rico* classes, could not recreate the social diversity of the New Mexican villages.²⁴ Yet they included many people born in New Mexico, larger numbers from Colorado, and fewer from Arizona and Texas. In addition from the first decade of the century and increasingly through the 1920s, there were thousands who were born in villages and towns in several Mexican states. If the regional origins of the beet-worker communities were diverse, they were united by class. The inhabitants in the beet colonias were proletarians.

The colonias were company towns, planned and controlled by their industrial employers. Raul Dominguez, the Mexican consul in Salt Lake City, reported of Billings, Montana: "*La compañía de azúcar es la que en realidad maneja el gobierno de la ciudad y del condado.*" (In reality the sugar company runs the city and county government.) The company towns of the north were a subordinate part of larger population centers, located across the tracks, highway, or river, or more commonly on the outskirts of Euro-American communities, purposely "removed from the incorporated town so that the municipalities were not required to provide services." As late as 1938, a new permanent colony was built in Torrington, Wyoming, with a single outside hydrant for water and a row of out-houses.²⁵

In addition to the company colonias, Mexican beet-worker families who came to the region also settled in cities, often the same slums quickly vacated by the Europeans. They formed colonias in Denver, Pueblo, Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, Hastings (Nebraska), Kansas City, Billings, Cheyenne, and other places. Their colonias in the slum areas and jungles of the region's cities and towns survived for several generations.²⁶

A comparison of the historical process of

Germans from Russia and Mexican colonization challenges the argument posed by Richard Sallet that the former are an ethnic minority whose fate parallels that of Blacks and Chicanos. Despite numerous difficulties, especially in the early years, the European immigrants quickly settled and purchased farms, with abundant assistance from the sugar beet companies. The employers offered free tools, assistance in planting, and easy terms of rent and land purchase. As a result, the Germans from Russia were quickly absorbed into the Euro-American population. Throughout the period Mexicans were accepted and stereotyped only as proletarians. Holly Vice President J. C. Bailey of Colorado Springs testified in 1928: "Thinning and chopping beets is not the easiest work in the world—it is certainly a work that the white labor will not perform." As R. W. Roskelley later observed, unlike the Germans from Russia, the "Mexican is a different caste."²⁷

Stereotyping justified the employment of Mexicans in the fields and some of the distinct features of their work, including the short-handled hoe. Geographer Esther Anderson of the University of Nebraska reported that the short-handled hoe was "characteristic of the Mexican and Japanese workers."²⁸ In fact, this tool was linked early in the century to the presence or absence of child labor. European family labor at this time depended on children. Fathers in the family could do most of their tasks, including hoeing, standing up, while children stooped to do thinning and blocking. The early Mexican and Japanese workers, recruited as sojourners, did not have children to perform the stoop tasks, so they were assigned short-handled hoes and stooped to block and thin simultaneously. When Mexican families entered the fields after World War I, the short-handled hoe still was ideologically affixed to them.

Sugar beet employers and their supporters also stereotyped Mexicans in order to justify child labor, which had been abolished in urban industrial occupations but not in agriculture in the early twentieth century. Anderson justified child labor throughout the 1920s and 1930s, writing, "The children who work in the fields

are generally well treated, fed and clothed. They live out of doors and the exercise generally does not injure them."²⁹

Her romanticized view of the farm was widely contradicted by child labor investigators. One study indicated that children constantly complained of backaches and inability to sleep and reported that they "scream and cry" from fatigue and that they could not breathe fresh air as they "have to lie in the dust and crawl on their knees all day." During topping they suffered gashes on legs and knees, suffered loss of fingers and rheumatism, and occasionally wound up permanently crippled. Studies of child beet topping in the region also reported widespread occurrence of misshapen bodies, including underdeveloped shoulder girdles and flat feet.³⁰

The few school officials who attacked child labor typically were not native to the region. Superintendent Sexon of Sterling, Colorado, calculated that by age thirteen, children who worked in the beet fields were on average 10 percent shorter and between twenty-two and thirty-one pounds lighter than other children in the district. Superintendent Black of Eaton reported that "Nowhere are there wholesome conditions." He concluded that beet workers "are the most sickly children we have in school." A 1933 study determined that 65 percent of the children between the ages of seven and fifteen in beet-worker families worked in the fields and lived near starvation on inadequate diets of beans, flour, coffee, lard, and sugar with only rare servings of milk. Furthermore, despite the stipulations in worker contracts, few families had fruit and vegetable gardens, and those who did usually lacked water for irrigation. Infant mortality among families of beet workers was about three times that of growers.³¹

The singling out of Mexicans went beyond work to public places. Constables and judges harassed Mexicans, who lacked political influence. In many counties the officials' earnings were based on a fee system, so they had "a financial interest in conviction." One observer noted that "for a Mexican to be arrested and accused is to be convicted." Police even raided adjoining counties to get workers, then set up

"jack rabbit courts."³²

The discrimination affected old and New Mexicans alike, yet many observers suggest that differences of citizenship were more important than class similarities or an earlier common history. Some suggest that the two groups remained almost totally isolated from each other, while others point to rivalries, personal disagreements, and the New Mexicans' assumption of superiority to the foreign born. Miriam MacDonald of the WPA reported a "pronounced antagonism between the two groups." The New Mexicans hated to be called Mexican, while the Mexican immigrants hated to be called Spanish. Some of the clashes were based on class perceptions. Señora Consuelo R., near Billings, Montana, said of José Pacheco, an *enganchador* (labor recruiter): "*dice que es de origen español, a pesar de que habla como los indios, como cuando dice mismo, pronuncia mesmo. Dicen que cuando hablan inglés, los tratan [sic] bien, pero cuando hablan español, los maltrata.*" (He says he is of Spanish origin, in spite of speaking like the Indians, as when he says mismo, he pronounces it mesmo. They say that when you speak English, they treat you well, but when you speak Spanish, they mistreat you.) Pacheco was also referred to as a "*Mexicano renegado*" (a Mexican denying his ancestry). Many other observers noted that old and New Mexicans often had their own separate social and cultural groups.³³

These antagonisms can be understood best not on the basis of inherent cultural differences but rather within the context of Anglo-Mexicano relations. University of California economist Paul Taylor observed that Anglos who claimed that there were important differences between New Mexicans and old Mexicans could not tell them apart: "There is no way for the general [Euro-American] public to distinguish" between the two.³⁴

There is much evidence that the hostility between the two groups stemmed principally from the New Mexicans' resentment of Euro-American discrimination aimed at them as well as at the immigrants from old Mexico. As the number of old Mexicans increased, especially

after World War I, overt discrimination by Euro-Americans, including Germans from Russia, intensified. Signs reading "White Trade Only" or "No Mexicans Allowed" addressed citizens and immigrants alike in stores, barber shops, restaurants, movie theaters, bars, pool rooms, dance halls, shoeshine stands, and public swimming pools. At the same time police harassment and differential treatment of Mexicans also intensified. Mexican women were not welcomed by Euro-American women in the PTA. During the Depression people of Mexican descent were systematically excluded from relief and WPA work. Exclusion extended even to religion. Dioceses created separate churches or distinct seating for Euro-Americans and Mexicans.³⁵

Spanish speakers' antagonism toward discrimination was frequently displaced onto other Spanish speakers. A Longmont man born in New Mexico blamed Mexican immigrants for his exclusion from the barbershops in town, which he asserted had been open to him before the influx of Mexican workers. Although Euro-Americans considered him a Mexican and discriminated against him on the basis of his background, he continued to blame recent immigrants rather than to identify with them against Euro-Americans. As one observer concluded, Euro-Americans discriminated against the person of Mexican origin because of his "economic status, his origin, and his physical differences, [which] combine to create a situation in which he is regarded as of an inferior race."³⁶

Despite such incidents of animosity, however, the isolation and hostility between the two groups have been exaggerated. Paul Taylor noted that while some Mexican colonias on the South Platte were occupied predominantly by New Mexicans and others by old Mexicans, many were mixed. Mixed residential settings could be found in colonias as far apart as Lovell and Torrington, Wyoming, Fort Collins, Colorado, and Grand Island and Scottsbluff, Nebraska. Taylor added that old and New Mexicans "work and live side by side," and "mingle in social intercourse." The friction that took place was "like a sort of family quarrel."³⁷

Segregation not only excluded old and New Mexicans, it forced them to share public places and to reside in the same parts of town. Their children attended the same public schools, and were taught that, despite the protests of those who were United States citizens, they were all Mexicans. They worked and played together and developed a common identity. A schoolteacher in Torrington, Wyoming, reported that the school they attended together "resembles a big family." Many residents recall that despite the occasional friction, "the relationship[s] between native and non-native people were generally good." They attended common social events, and both old and New Mexicans shared the *Cinco de Mayo* and *Diez y Seis de Septiembre* holidays. Eventually organizations like the *Comision Honorifica*, created originally only for Mexican-born immigrants, admitted people from both groups. Furthermore, workers and their children from New Mexico, Colorado, and Mexico intermarried freely throughout the beet region.³⁸

The beet workers shared the bad as well as the good. Especially during the Depression the children and adults of all beet-worker families suffered very high rates of illnesses and often lived together on the edge of starvation. In Torrington children tied soiled rags around their bare feet and walked as far as a mile to school in temperatures twenty degrees below zero. In one case, when several hundred pounds of flour was stolen from the feed store in a winter of starvation, it was found distributed throughout the colony in ten and fifteen pound packages.³⁹

The common lives of *betabeleros* (beet workers) as workers served as a basis for unity within this developing working-class culture. The experience in the fields and confrontations with Euro-American farmers and corporation employers enhanced a common identity. As workers and settlers *betabeleros* often boycotted stores and public places that discriminated against them on the basis of Mexican ancestry. Organizations like the *Comision Honorifica* protested discrimination as a group. Beet workers sometimes achieved redress through the police or the Mexican consulate. On occasion they convinced

farmers to remeasure fields that workers considered larger than they had been originally told. More often they had to accept the farmers' ultimatum, take it or leave it. Such failures resulted primarily from the fact that the lower class unskilled workers lacked highly schooled, well-placed, and politically-influential voices within the dominant Euro-American community.⁴⁰

Yet their weakness as workers was also their greatest strength. Encouraged by the IWW during World War I, *betabeleros* organized and engaged in a handful of strikes for higher wages. One threatened strike in 1918 against National Sugar Company was thwarted by a corporate alliance with police, its use of a secret service agent to infiltrate the organization, and threats of imprisonment for those who refused to return to work.⁴¹

The workers were only temporarily deterred and by the early 1920s had formed the Mexican Beet Workers Committee, which presented grievances, petitioning for clean water, habitable housing, and guaranteed pay for work. In the late 1920s, more important worker organizations appeared on the Great Plains, sometimes as ethnic organizations, often in conjunction with communist or labor union sponsored associations. In 1929, a group of Mexican beet workers from Colorado were present when the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) formed in Ohio and established the Agricultural Workers Industrial League. Mexican and United States-born workers also created the *Asociación de Betabeleros* (Beet Workers' Association), an independent ethnic-oriented union that briefly affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Employers acknowledged *Asociación* influence in negotiating better wages and terms of employment for the workers. At its peak the *Asociación* claimed 10,000 members and sympathizers, mostly from Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. The AFL controlled the organization but acknowledged that it had to tolerate the presence of internal Socialist, IWW, Communist, and Mexican nationalist factions. Despite the *Asociación's* success, the AFL refused to grant

it a charter, asserting that it first had to prove itself self-sufficient, and withdrew its support during the nadir of the Depression. Mexican nationalist interests within the Mexican government sharply rebuked the AFL, criticizing it for mistreating Mexicans. The *Asociación de Betabeleros* reorganized and, along with several groups including Communists and Socialists, formed the United Front Committee of Agricultural Workers in 1932. Together they continued organizing throughout the Great Plains states. In May 1932, an estimated 18,000 workers staged an unsuccessful strike.⁴²

During this period workers also joined together to protect their rights and to resolve difficulties and claims through local *Comisiones Honorificas* and the Mexican consul. They were also active in the Communist-led but AFL linked Unemployed Councils. As individuals and in groups they protested the padrone system of store credit and the link between company and growers. Private detectives and local sheriffs reported on and undermined the workers' union activities.⁴³

In 1935 many surviving beet-worker locals that had been affiliated with the AFL formed the Colorado Conference of Beet Field and Agricultural Unions, associated with the AFL's new national, the Agricultural Workers Union (AWU). They immediately demanded higher wages and asserted the rights of beet workers to relief and WPA employment.

By 1937, independent locals of the old *Asociación de Betabeleros* and the AWU, disenchanted with the lack of support from the AFL, bolted en masse to the United Cannery, Packing, and Agricultural Workers of America (UCPAWA) of the CIO. At its peak this Communist-led union claimed between 18,000 and 20,000 settled and migratory dues-paying members in the Great Plains states. The membership was estimated at 60 percent Mexican born and 40 percent United States born, proportions probably representative of the composition of the adult beet labor force in the region. Unionists attended public hearings, threatened strikes in several states, and challenged discrimination by the WPA. The corporations responded with

efforts to divide the workers and were able to place sympathetic "workers' spokesmen" in negotiating sessions while recruiting more migratory workers from Texas. This weakened an already hesitant union leadership, which backed down from a strike in early 1938. The leaders' failure to confront employers disillusioned workers and severely weakened the union's credibility. With at best modest success in organizing agricultural workers, UCPAWA barely survived in the beet fields beyond the end of the decade, and its failure supported the widespread criticism that the Anglo CIO leaders "don't know the first thing about beets."⁴⁴

The beet workers, organized and willing to challenge their employers, represented a self-conscious working class culture in the late 1930s. They were united by work, language and cultural similarities, and common alienation from the dominant Euro-American culture that included their neighbors and employers on the Great Plains, the Germans from Russia.

CONCLUSION

The labor demands of the sugar beet industry and the responses by its employees led to a stratified society of farm owners and proletarian field workers in the northern Great Plains. At the turn of the century, the industry adopted two simultaneous recruitment and employment strategies. To lure Germans from Russia, it encouraged their settlement as farmers. The Europeans quickly acquired farms, learned the English language, and assimilated into the host society. More gradually, they also adopted the customs of other United States farmers in refusing to perform the dirty, physically demeaning, and unpleasant stoop tasks in sugar beet field labor.

As production increased, the corporations had to develop a second strategy of hiring without the lure of land ownership. In the early 1900s, they brought in some Japanese workers as competition to the Germans from Russia. The Japanese were already experienced farmers, and because of high wages and lack of resistance they were able in large part to replicate the

success of the Europeans. They quickly rose to the status of renters. Increasing anti-Japanese hostility, however, placed obstacles to their continued acquisition of land. Large-scale migration from Japan to the United States ceased by 1906. By the 1910s few Japanese continued to come into the region, although many already there were able to purchase land, mostly through their United States-born children. Those who remained were successful settlers.

The companies adopted a different strategy for workers of Mexican descent, whom they hired initially as single, male sojourners in the early years of the century. Most of these workers initially came from southern Colorado but later from northern New Mexico and Texas. By World War I, the companies increasingly went to Texas to recruit Mexican-born workers who seldom put down roots in the beet growing communities. The sojourners represented a transitional phase in beet labor, a step toward permanent proletarianization of Mexicans as beet workers.

With the coming of World War I, expanded production, higher earnings, and alternative opportunities for Euro-Americans forced a field labor crisis on the companies. They adopted a new and less costly strategy of hiring more workers directly from Mexico and of bringing in entire families to settle. They thus could take advantage the labor of women and children, who had not worked earlier as sojourners. The tactic was aimed at creating not a new class of farmers but rather a class of hired workers tied permanently to the industry.

Mexicans born in the United States and in Mexico worked and lived together and were segregated from the dominant Euro-American society. As Paul Taylor noted, "migratory labor is a proletarian class, not a people with a developed culture."⁴⁵ As sojourners, the beet workers could not create a place for themselves in the beet fields, but once they settled their lives changed. The beet workers came to work, not to replicate the culture of the New Mexican homelands, which would have been impossible in any case because the beet communities were part of the recently formed rural industrial world whose residents came from several homelands.

This new proletarian culture included elements of the old cultures and of the new environment the workers encountered during the settlement process on the northern Great Plains.

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