

North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry

Kathleen Mapes
SUNY College

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2010 State Historical Society of Iowa

Recommended Citation

Mapes, Kathleen. "North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry."
The Annals of Iowa 69 (2010), 239-242.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol69/iss2/18>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

a conflict arose between big business and “progressive and radical farmers” (121). The vision of the latter group lost and was replaced by a more conservative one. In addition, World War I provided the opportunity for German Russians to escape the sugar beet fields as the industry turned to a new migrant work force from Mexico.

Mapes then shifts her attention to the history of Mexican migrant workers and the sugar beet industry during the 1920s, relating along the way the changing shape of immigration law in the United States, the forms of Mexican migration, and how Mexicans established their enclaves throughout the region. Finally, Mapes examines the era of the Great Depression. She finds that the sugar beet industry significantly influenced the move away from having an empire. At the same time, the New Deal created a permanent bond between the federal government and the sugar industry, one that the sugar interests would exploit throughout the remainder of the century. On the other hand, federal legislation that helped the sugar beet industry enormously also provided some oversight of abuses within the labor system, especially child labor, and provided a minimum wage structure for migrant sugar beet workers. More than anything, Mapes concludes, the sugar beet industry emerged from the 1930s as “a powerful and potent force” (246).

Mapes offers a very nuanced yet powerful examination of the triumph of industrialism over agricultural America, as well as corporate America’s ability to shape domestic and international politics. The text is very well researched and written. Indeed, this is one of the most lucid histories I have read in recent years. If the book has a problem, it is only in the title. “Tyranny” is a bit of a stretch. Indeed, the author makes clear that farmers had important influence on the industry from time to time, and migrant workers, whether German Russians or Mexicans, were never at the complete mercy of the companies. The latter point notwithstanding, this is an important and compelling history. Considering Iowa’s very similar experiment with sugar beets during the same time period, there is much to compare between the experiences of the two states, and Mapes’s book will provide an important context for Iowa’s sugar beet past.

North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry, by Jim Norris. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009. ix, 223 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.

Reviewer Kathleen Mapes is assistant professor of history at SUNY College at Geneseo. She is the author of *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics* (2009).

Jim Norris's new book, *North for the Harvest*, challenges the common perception of the Midwest as a homogeneous place of family farmers, hired laborers, and close-knit communities. By focusing on the rise and transformation of the sugar beet industry in the Red River Valley in North Dakota and Minnesota over the course of the twentieth century, and by including industrialists, farmers, and migrant workers in his narrative, Norris provides a much needed corrective to mythic understandings of rural America and midwestern history. In part economic history, in part social history, and in part political history, Norris's book places the history of the midwestern sugar beet industry in a much broader national and at times even international context.

The main arguments wedding the various chapters revolve around relations between and among the main protagonists in the Red River Valley sugar beet industry: American Crystal, local farmers, and Mexican workers. Unlike most rural histories, which focus on farmers, or labor histories, which hone in on the experiences of urban industrial workers, Norris transcends traditional sub-disciplinary boundaries and as a result is able to tell a complex and nuanced story. He begins his book with a useful albeit somewhat brief overview of the development of the sugar beet industry in the Red River Valley, including the search for an agricultural labor force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the succeeding chapters, he provides a chronological and thematic overview of changing labor and industrial relations, highlighting the major shifts with respect to which groups toiled in the fields: grower-factory relations, local community responses, and governmental intervention.

Norris highlights the period between 1929 and World War II as a particularly significant one. In the early years of the Great Depression, whites largely replaced Mexican workers, who often found themselves the victims of repatriation, high unemployment, and unfair discrimination. By the late 1930s, however, Mexicans once again became the bulk of the labor force. While the depression certainly undermined production, profits, and wages, it also helped to usher in a new era with the passage of the Jones-Costigan Act of 1934 and its successor, the Sugar Act of 1937. Those acts mandated minimum wages, prohibited child labor, and made the farmers' own government bonuses dependent upon compliance with the labor standards, thereby ensuring that the federal government became an important player in what had been a three-way relationship.

Turning to World War II, Norris argues that the war offered an opportunity to sugar beet workers who found their own power increased due to labor shortages and competition from other agricultural and in-

dustrial interests. That opportunity, however, was often cut short by the growing use of *bracero* laborers, who were imported into the Red River Valley to meet what many believed to be a severe labor shortage, as well as illegal immigration into the United States, which agribusiness encouraged and immigration officials ignored. Nonetheless, Norris found that as farmers saw increased profits during the war, they tended to become less prejudiced toward the Mexican labor force and somewhat more interested in meeting the workers' needs. That paternalism increased in the postwar period, especially among farmers who were lured by the promise of high profits as well as threatened by the possibility of government sanctions under the Sugar Act. Norris argues that the paternalism benefited Mexican workers, who gained greater access to credit, improved housing, and enhanced welfare as growing numbers of Mexicans began to settle in the Red River Valley.

Although labor relations seemed to have improved in the postwar period, they did not remain stable. In fact, Norris argues that after Mexicans started to settle in the valley, local residents grew increasingly concerned about perceived crime waves, which they blamed on resident Mexicans. Those same local residents were also concerned about the problem of juvenile delinquency among Anglo teenagers. As a solution to both "problems," local farmers began to hire local teenagers to tend the fields. While many teenagers answered the call, they also often proved to be unreliable, unskilled, and difficult to control.

As the industry continued to struggle with the question of labor, industrialists and farmers found themselves increasingly divided. Farmers wanted American Crystal to expand and modernize operations so that all could take advantage of the market opportunities created by the embargo of Cuban sugar. American Crystal proved unresponsive to the growers' demands. Moreover, American Crystal officials often sided with government officials when it came to the question of migrant labor, pushing growers to further address working and living conditions. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, those tensions reached a boiling point. Radically remaking the industry, growers banded together, formed a cooperative, and bought American Crystal. Equally important, the growers abandoned American Crystal's labor agency in Texas and decided to recruit workers individually on their own. Combined with the growing use of new technologies and herbicides, as well as the continued use of local teenagers, growers successfully sought ways to reduce their dependence on Mexican workers. While the Mexican workers who continued to toil in the fields often gained increased access to much needed social services, especially with respect to education and health, as well as inclusion in minimum wage

and workers' compensation laws, they found themselves increasingly vulnerable to individual growers.

Anyone interested in midwestern, rural, labor, Mexican American, and business history should read Norris's well-written, compelling account of the Red River Valley's sugar beet industry.

Hero Street, USA: The Story of Little Mexico's Fallen Soldiers, by Marc Wilson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. xvi, 192 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth.

Reviewer Robert F. Jefferson is associate professor of history at Xavier University in Ohio. He is the author of *Fighting for Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America* (2008).

In *Hero Street, USA*, journalist Marc Wilson offers an admirable recounting of the struggles of men from a poor neighborhood in Silvis, Illinois, who made the ultimate sacrifice in America's wars in the twentieth century. Second Street was the location where devotion to family and country was born and nurtured for many Mexican immigrants who served in the nation's armed forces. As Wilson contends, "The story of Hero Street is largely untold, and U.S. history is incomplete without this story."

Based on a plethora of primary material, *Hero Street, USA* dramatically captures the travails of Mexican Americans who migrated to the upper Midwest from 1910 to 2008 and shows how the processes of war, revolution, and social change transformed their lives over the course of the twentieth century. Wilson uses the wartime service of the fallen soldiers as chapters to frame the story of the Mexican American community in Silvis, Illinois. The opening chapters document the struggles of the Sandoval and Pompa families as they fled the violence and economic deprivation brought about by the Mexican Revolution and crossed the Mexican border into the United States. Eager to begin a new life and attracted by the employment opportunities provided by the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, Mexican nationals made their way through a handful of states before landing in Silvis in 1917. Wilson carefully describes the concerns and aspirations of newcomers to Silvis as they negotiated the worlds of Mexico and Silvis. Often subject to American racism and labor-capital strife, many newcomers pinned their hopes of gaining citizenship and future prosperity on the battlefield actions of their offspring during periods of war. Those aspirations often carried fatal consequences.

Throughout World War II, mournful memories of letters written by GIs such as Willie Sandoval and Claro Solis to loved ones back home,