

## Hero Street, USA: The Story of Little Mexico's Fallen Soldiers

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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,

along with regretful letters from the War Department to dozens of homes along Second Street, provided pointed reminders of the terrible costs that war exacted on both the dead and the living. In chapters relating to the Korean War, the selfless actions taken by Joe Gomez and other GIs dramatically point out the degree to which Silvis's residents used military service to enlarge their claims to American life.

Silvis's immigrant community sought to recover, resuscitate, and keep their wartime memories of the recently fallen alive in the minds of city residents. In 1954 Silvis's Mexican American ex-GIs established their own local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, later spearheaded the push to create a veterans memorial park, and during the late 1960s worked to have Second Street repaved and renamed Hero Street. But the commemorative efforts staged by the townspeople of Silvis were enveloped in bittersweet irony as some of the children of the fallen heroes began to express ambivalent feelings about the unique traditions, customs, and practices that their grandparents had brought across the Mexican-American border nearly a hundred years earlier. Indeed, the tears that Claro Solis's great-nephew shed during a trip to Texas bring *Hero Street, USA* to a close.

Wilson's book parallels a spate of literature that has begun to re-examine the complex issues of immigration and how international events contributed to the making of Mexican American identity during the twentieth century. *Hero Street, USA* recovers the ways Mexican Americans altered their religious practices and family networks to shape their neighborhoods and communities in their new American surroundings. But it also raises intriguing questions about the social foundations of Mexican American communities in the Midwest. For example, how did latent racism, xenophobia, and localism in towns like Silvis, Illinois, shape the experiences of Mexican nationals and their ideas about national identity? Also, if Mexican Americans experienced very little racism in the segregated American armed forces, as Wilson claims, what might the appearance of returning Mexican American veterans and the reaction of Silvis's white community to their presence tell us about the cultural adaptations and cross-fertilization that was taking place in other Mississippi River towns? Finally, *Hero Street, USA* is reticent on how the experiences of Mexican nationals in Silvis between 1930 and 1960 were akin to those faced by immigrants who lived in other areas of the Midwest during that period. Even if it does not provide adequate answers to these questions, *Hero Street, USA* is an important addition to studies of immigrant life in the Midwest.