



## Mexican Community Formation in Nebraska: 1910-1950

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Article Summary: Mexican immigrants created a regional community throughout the state through urban-rural migrations, social and cultural activities, and their regional Mexican consulate. They faced obstacles similar to those faced by other immigrants throughout the Midwest, plus others that came from being seen as a racially distinct.





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# MEXICAN COMMUNITY FORMATION

## IN NEBRASKA: 1910-1950

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BY BRYAN WINSTON

**O**lga Olivares, sitting in the Mexican-American Museum in Scottsbluff on the first day of fall in 1996, spoke of Pascual Huerta. An experienced stonemason in Mexico, Huerta came to the United States but only found work in the beet fields of western Nebraska during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite being unable to work in the building trades, Huerta was determined to demonstrate his skills. During the 1930s he collected stones as he walked between work and his home, using them to construct a building with the help of ten other men. The building was used for storage and also meetings, serving people of Mexican descent over the years. Then, in 1995, it became the home of the Mexican-American Museum of Scottsbluff.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the migration of ethnic Mexicans to Nebraska from 1910 to 1950 and how these new arrivals and their children created

a regional Mexican community throughout the state.<sup>2</sup> Mexicans coming to Nebraska faced obstacles similar to many immigrants throughout the Midwest: poor housing, insecure employment, limited English language, and lack of citizenship. Yet, European immigrant groups in the Midwest experienced their new homes differently than ethnic Mexicans, as European ethnic differences increasingly collapsed into a white American identity between 1910 and World War II.<sup>3</sup> Mexicans in the Midwest did not follow the model of most European-immigrants because local officials, neighbors, and employers continued to view Mexicans as racially distinct. Nonetheless, Mexicans established a statewide community through urban-rural migrations, social and cultural activities, and their regional Mexican consulate.<sup>4</sup>

I use the term “ethnic Mexicans” because of the complexity of Mexican migration and settlement

**Mexican mother and children with a visiting nurse, 510½ Woolworth Avenue, Omaha, May 19, 1926.**  
History Nebraska RG3882-PH21-15

in Midwestern states during the first half of the twentieth century. Whether born in Mexico or the United States, most were migrants who followed limited employment and used mobility as a tool of survival.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic Mexican status in the twentieth-century United States was predicated on the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848 and transformed Mexicans living in the newly acquired United States territory into American citizens overnight.<sup>6</sup> Despite the legal equality of Mexican Americans, economic competition, racially motivated violence, and Anglo-American migration to the Southwest during the second half of the nineteenth century prompted segregation and economic inequality of ethnic Mexicans.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Mexican government economic policies and openness to United States business interests drove rural Mexicans off their land and often to Northern Mexico and the Southwestern United States.<sup>8</sup> The violence and economic disruption of the Mexican Revolution intensified Mexican migration north while creating fear among white Americans living in the Southwest, which further increased Mexican-Anglo racial tensions.<sup>9</sup> It is in this context that Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans migrated to the Midwest, an area with a limited history of ethnic Mexican inhabitants. The possibilities for new social relations and Mexican economic power, though never fully realized, certainly existed as ethnic Mexican entered the Midwest during the 1910s.

In Nebraska, ethnic Mexicans formed their communities near their workplaces and transformed their homes in Omaha and western Nebraska. Also, they maintained a statewide community through an urban-rural migration pattern that followed seasonal work and cultural activities, connecting the many Mexicans of Nebraska. By 1930, Nebraska's Mexican population reached 6,321 people out of a total state population of more than 1.25 million people. In the same year, the only states outside the American Southwest with larger Mexican populations were Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Kansas, and Wyoming.<sup>10</sup> As they came in increasing numbers, Mexicans encountered obstacles to their incorporation into Nebraskan society. They faced limited employment protections, segregation, and discrimination. Employers' desire for cheap, seasonal labor limited Mexican opportunities for social mobility and relegated Mexicans to specific residences. Then, social workers, local government officials, and intellectuals, while advocating for Americanization classes, used rhetoric about cleanliness and

crime to denigrate the social capabilities of ethnic Mexicans. The Great Depression exacerbated economic obstacles for the Mexicans of Nebraska, forcing many to return to Mexico, but did not spell the end of the community.

Ethnic Mexicans responded to discrimination and marginalization by creating community organizations and patriotic societies and celebrating their cultural heritage to form social and cultural ties.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Mexicans promoted cultural bonds through monthly dances, religious practice, and sharing food. At the same time, ethnic Mexicans wrote the Kansas City Mexican consulate to protest wage theft and to seek aid. In a joint process of resistance and cohesion, ethnic Mexicans furthered social ties that helped identify their commonalities. As historian Michael Innis-Jiménez notes, community formation happens when people "have a sense of being in an environment where they share common experiences, norms, and cultural understanding; they must also believe that they share a common bond and concern for one another."<sup>12</sup> Ethnic Mexicans built their community in Nebraska through cooperative acts of creation and resistance.

### **The Building Blocks of Community: Mobility and Settlement**

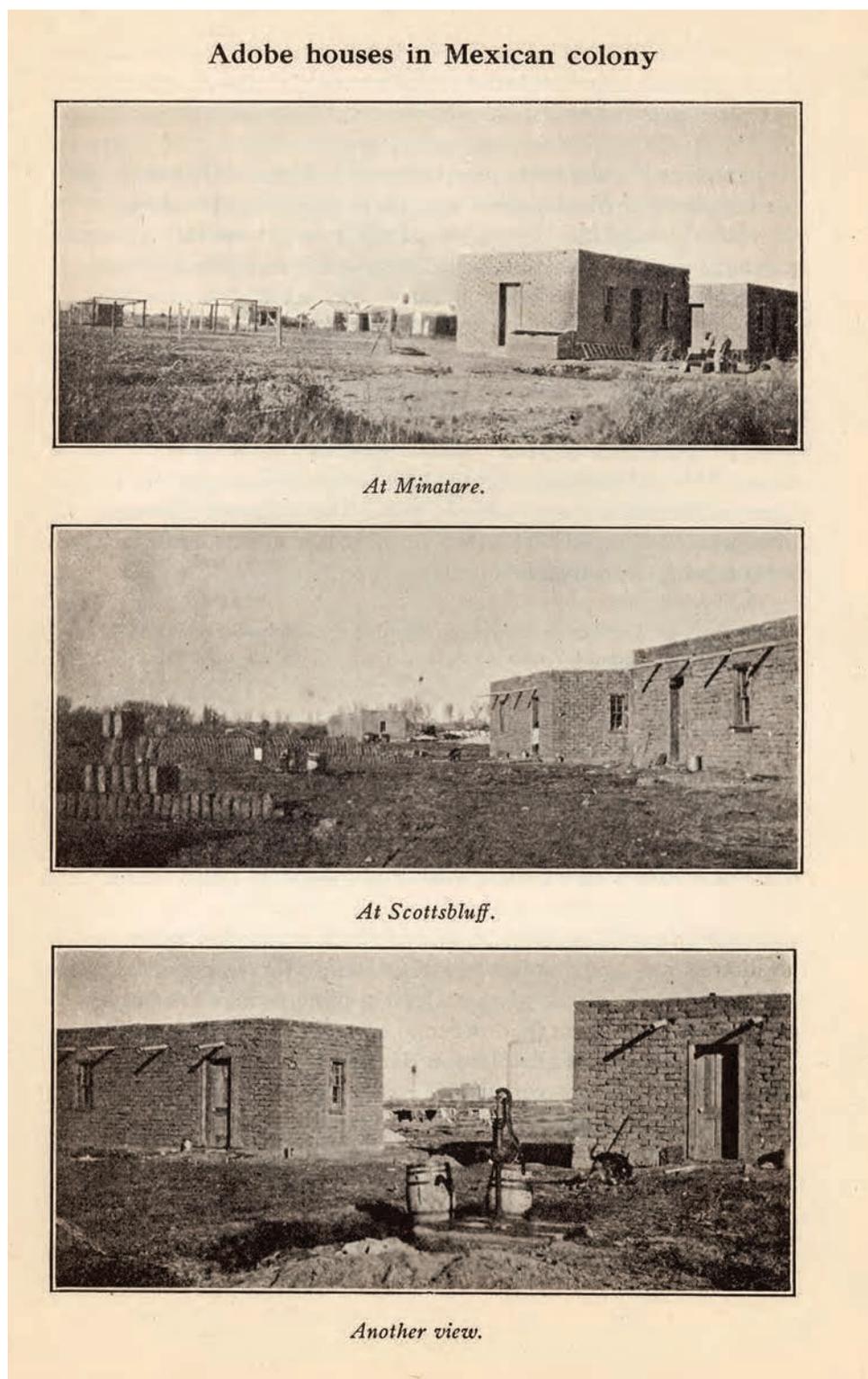
Midwest industries, such as packing plants, steel mills, and farms, sought cheap labor during World War I and after, making the Midwest a more desirable location for Mexican migrants.<sup>13</sup> Ethnic Mexicans also moved to the Midwest in efforts to escape the growing segregation, low pay, and racially motivated violence of the Southwest. Ethnic Mexicans were contracted in places such as San Antonio or Kansas City to perform railroad labor or undertake harvest work in the sugar beet fields of western Nebraska. Others took jobs in meatpacking plants in South Omaha, where a multiethnic, working-class immigrant community took shape.<sup>14</sup> As they settled, whether permanently or temporarily for employment, they established community organizations and held cultural gatherings. Mexicans made Nebraska a significant destination for employment and for cultural activities through their movement to and within the state.

Mexican employment directly shaped Mexican residences throughout the state, whether in the meatpacking district of South Omaha, the railroad yards of Havelock outside Lincoln, or the farms of Scotts Bluff County in western Nebraska. The Mexicans of Nebraska, like many working people

of the early-twentieth century, lived near their places of employment. Railroad workers made boxcars into homes. South Omaha residents often lived as boarders when they “wintered” in the “Magic City” and accepted seasonal employment at the many meatpacking plants.<sup>15</sup> Ethnic Mexicans in Scottsbluff built adobe homes from Nebraskan soil and leftover hay from livestock railroad yards. Bob Huerta recalled how his father, who migrated from Mexico through Texas and Kansas, began building an adobe home in Scottsbluff in 1934. The elder Huerta used soil from his sister-in-law’s yard, straw from railroad livestock reserve cars, and white rock from the nearby sugar factory. He then completed their home, which still stood in 1996, by tearing down the company town shack and repurposing it as a roof for the adobe home.<sup>16</sup> Ethnic Mexican homes reflected an adaptive community making the most of wherever they could find housing and employment.

Their recent arrival to the region often meant ethnic Mexicans lived dispersed among existing ethnic enclaves throughout Omaha. They often resided in Omaha’s Little Italy and Little Bohemia near other immigrant groups.<sup>17</sup> The home of many Czech immigrants, Little Bohemia was located in South Omaha, an independent city until Omaha annexed it in 1915. The many immigrant families of the neighborhood relied on nearby packinghouses for work.<sup>18</sup> According to a 1925 census taken by S. F. Record, 100 Mexican families lived in South Omaha, 37 families at 6th and Pierce, and 60 families in the Gibson neighborhood.<sup>19</sup> There were 1,250 Mexicans in Omaha in 1927, working either for railroads or packing plants; at that time, the largest concentration lived between 24th and 30th streets along O, P, Q, and R Streets, near the packinghouses of South Omaha. The second largest neighborhood was on Sixth Street near the Burlington station and tracks. Also, a Mexican population lived at Gibson, near the Burlington terminal yard. Mexicans here made homes of boxcars close to the bluff.<sup>20</sup> The multiple, smaller Mexican outposts within Omaha reflect a dispersed pattern more common in the Midwest.<sup>21</sup>

Despite residential dispersion, Mexicans established community organizations in Omaha that provided social services and cultural expression. By 1919, Mexicans established Omaha branches of *Asociación Mexicana Amado Nervo*, *Comité Patriótico Mexicano*, (Mexican cultural and patriotic societies, respectively), and *Comité Cático Central* (a local Catholic organization), as well as Local 602 of the American Federation



of Labor.<sup>22</sup> This was part of a larger national trend of Mexicans creating organizations that served their communities with cultural celebrations, social services, and workplace protection.<sup>23</sup> Over the years, more Omaha-based organizations took

**From Sara A. Brown and Robie O. Sargent, *Children Working in the Beet Fields of the North Platte Valley of Nebraska* (1924).**



**The Great Western Sugar Company opened a sugar beet refinery Scottsbluff in 1910.**  
HN RG2670-PH0-2

shape, such as *Esperanza*, which became the Mexican Mutual Society (MMS) in 1922. *Esperanza* and later MMS organized community celebrations and supplied social services. Community members also started a *Comisión Honorífica Mexicana* (Honorary Commission), a patriotic organization organized through the Mexican consular service, during the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> Mexican consulates and affiliated *Comisiones Honoríficas* attended to community issues and organized cultural celebrations for Mexican nationals living abroad.<sup>25</sup> Such organizations could provide political and social anchors for settled communities in Nebraska's cities and a site of connection for those Mexicans who migrated seasonally to work in rural Nebraska.

While ethnic Mexicans used local organizations for cultural and social support, Mexican community leaders turned to the Mexican government to address more pressing threats. In October 1919, Ricardo Picazzo frantically wrote Mexican Ambassador Ignacio Bonillas on behalf of the Mexican *colonia* of Omaha. Picazzo signed the letter along with nearly 200 of his compatriots, asking for defense of 1,500 Mexicans living in the city.<sup>26</sup> A United States immigration agent had been harassing newly arriving Mexican migrants, demanding passports and jailing Mexicans on charges of vagrancy if they were not employed. Picazzo, who was president of both the *Asociación*

*Mexicana Amado Nervo* and *Comité Patriótico Mexicano*, as well as the secretary of Local 602 of the AFL, requested the appointment of a consul to the city to defend the Omaha *colonia*.<sup>27</sup> Soon Ambassador Bonillas contacted Consul Mauricio Morales of the Kansas City consulate, informing him of the plight of the Omaha *colonia* and asking for advice. Morales admitted he could not support the *colonia* from so far away and recommended the creation of a new consulate in Omaha. Yet, in February 1920, the office of the Secretary of Foreign Relations (SRE) prevented the establishment of the new consulate, leaving Omaha Mexicans in limbo.<sup>28</sup> The ethnic Mexicans of Nebraska continued to rely on a distant consulate in Kansas City for aid and protection. The Mexican government was spread too thin in the Midwest, requiring ethnic Mexicans to search for other ways to maintain their community.

Some city-dwelling Mexicans built ties with the agricultural communities that popped up in the spring and summer along railroad tracks and the Platte River, from Grand Island in central Nebraska to Lyman in western Nebraska, practically on the Nebraska-Wyoming border. Some Nebraska Mexican agricultural communities were permanent, with a history as long, if not longer, than that of the Mexican community in Omaha. Ethnic Mexicans settled in the town of Scottsbluff



as the thriving sugar beet industry of western Nebraska ensured agricultural employment. Mexican heads of household contracted out acres at a time to work during the harvests. The whole family, even young children, headed into the fields to ensure a productive beet yield for the region's farm owners. An average family tended 15 to 20 acres according to a 1927 report by George Edson, a U.S. Department of Labor investigator.<sup>29</sup> The Mexicans of western Nebraska tended 11.5 acres per person 12 years or older, with the majority of Mexicans working in Scottsbluff and Bayard in 1927.<sup>30</sup> Farm work offered an alternative or supplement to factory and railroad work.

Mexican urban-rural migration from Omaha and the Midwest swelled in the summer to bolster small communities of settled Mexicans in western Nebraska. Many were part of a recurring urban-rural migration that connected the beet fields to packing plants, sugar factories, and railroads from the 1920s through the 1940s.<sup>31</sup> Some Mexicans traveled west from Omaha. Others came north from Kansas City and points in Kansas. Some came from Colorado or even from as far as Texas.<sup>32</sup> In 1927, 275 Mexicans were contracted to work in Scottsbluff from Kansas City and Omaha, while another 150 came from Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico to work in the beet fields. Another 1,550 Mexicans were hired locally, though it is

unclear how many resided in the Scottsbluff region.<sup>33</sup> A Works Progress Administration (WPA) worker reported that "whole families are known to move from Omaha into western Nebraska for the summer, where they contract as a unit to care for a beet farm. With the coming of winter, however, they again return to Omaha."<sup>34</sup>

To ensure economic viability, ethnic Mexican community formation in Nebraska during the early-twentieth century was characterized by the urban settlements of Omaha, the agricultural labor of western Nebraska, and urban-rural movement across the state. In Omaha, early institutions such as patriotic and cultural organizations gave opportunities to bond beyond railroad yards or meatpacking plants. In rural areas, whole families worked together cultivating sugar beets. Despite the distance that separated Omaha from western Nebraska, ethnic Mexicans undertook industrial or agricultural employment depending on availability. Early organizations and seasonal employment built a web that had the potential to sustain the Mexican community of Nebraska. But ethnic Mexicans were not the only migrants in the state. And they entered a United States grappling with anti-immigrant rhetoric, racial discrimination and segregation, and assimilation efforts.

**Mexican beet workers visiting the Colorado & Southern and Burlington "Big Beet Special" at Loveland, Colorado, to learn "new methods which would assist in increasing their bonus check," circa 1926.**

HN RG1431-2106

### Obstacles to Community Formation

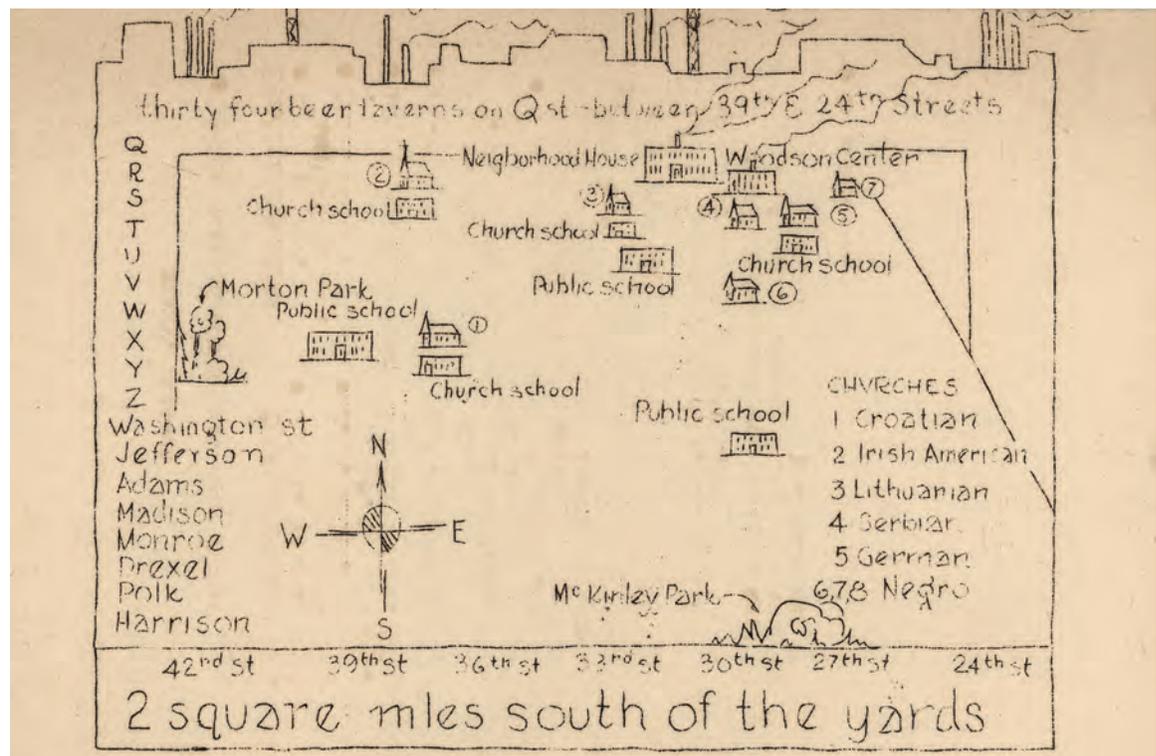
Settlement house workers and social reformers used ethnic Mexican mobility as evidence of the need for assimilation efforts. Their efforts manifested as Americanization classes meant to weaken the cultural bonds that often comforted immigrant groups experiencing the shock of displacement, of being in a foreign land, and of limited knowledge of a common language.<sup>35</sup> Public officials also used their power to limit the resources available to the ethnic Mexicans of Nebraska, sometimes resulting in racial segregation in western Nebraska. At the same time, the economic turmoil of the Great Depression and resulting repatriation of ethnic Mexicans disrupted the community. The adaptation of seasonal employment often devolved into under- and un-employment during these lean years, driving many people of Mexican descent to leave Nebraska for Mexico. Nebraskan Mexicans had to weather the forces of destabilization and opposition.

Mexican migrants often lived in sharp poverty in urban and rural Nebraska, resulting in unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions, which many saw as a problem unique to Mexicans. Lara Campbell, a WPA worker, described ethnic Mexican homes in Scottsbluff as “miserable tar-papered shacks, or at best, tiny unplastered

wooden buildings—one room divided by a rough partition or a sheet.”<sup>36</sup> She implored others to ask, “would we do better than they under their handicaps and hardships?”<sup>37</sup> Social workers in Omaha expressed similar concerns when visiting ethnic Mexican families at their homes. One worker determined Mexicans’ “extreme poverty” and “their wretched homes” required social workers “to approach their problem as a special project.”<sup>38</sup> T. Earl Sullenger said of Mexicans in Omaha: “Poor ventilation and crowded conditions are common. Their standard of living is very low.”<sup>39</sup>

Social service providers simultaneously reported on ethnic Mexican living conditions, helped shape public perceptions of ethnic Mexicans as inferior, and led Americanization classes.<sup>40</sup> The Neighborhood House, a settlement house in South Omaha formed by the Social Settlement Association and used by many ethnic groups, directed Mexicans to health and homemaking classes. One monthly report praised the work of Neighborhood House health classes because of ethnic Mexicans’ “ignorance of all hygiene.”<sup>41</sup> One nurse led “a Health and Cooking Club of little Mexican girls, who are learning as much about cleanliness as about food,” demonstrating how social service workers did not believe Mexicans understood how to care for themselves properly.<sup>42</sup>

Hand-drawn map of neighborhood served by the Social Settlement Association's Neighborhood House, from the *Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Social Settlement Association*, January 5, 1935. HN RG5337.AM



As scholar Natalia Molina has documented, settlement houses and public health officials throughout the country used hygiene and sanitation classes to declare Mexicans and other immigrants as unfit for citizenship.<sup>43</sup> Americanization and English classes were also common at the Neighborhood House, though it is unclear how often Mexicans participated in them. Historian George Sánchez explains how middle-class social workers promoted Americanization classes that denigrated immigrant culture as unbecoming of Americans.<sup>44</sup> Although settlement houses provided necessary aid and recreational space to ethnic Mexicans, they also, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to discrimination against Mexicans.

Local police harassed ethnic Mexicans who resided in Omaha, both impeding the community and increasing the perception that Mexicans were inclined to commit crimes. S. F. Secord acted as an interpreter for ethnic Mexicans in the South Omaha police court and a few business firms during the 1920s. Secord revealed how police often rounded up ethnic Mexicans on payday so that they could pay fines. She lamented, “Mexicans were frequently railroaded to the penitentiary, abused by judges, insulted by neighbors and cheated by lawyers.”<sup>45</sup> Police most often arrested ethnic Mexicans for drunkenness and vagrancy, which sociologist T. Earl Sullenger claimed occurred at a higher rate than any other immigrant group in the city.<sup>46</sup> Scholars have documented how local legal systems disproportionately targeted ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities, which linked criminality to Mexican identity and hindered community development.<sup>47</sup> Omaha’s legal system may have contributed to notions of Mexicans as racially distinct.<sup>48</sup>

Such perceptions were present among some Omaha residents who posited that ethnic Mexicans were undesirable or inferior, a position that jeopardized Mexican employment opportunities and access to social services. United States Department of Labor investigator George T. Edson claimed Miss Helen Gauss of the Social Settlement Association “is not sympathetic with the Mexicans” and that Gauss said, “Mexicans and negroes underbid white men for jobs.”<sup>49</sup> Others reinforced attitudes like those of Gauss, such as T. Earl Sullenger, a professor of sociology at the University of Omaha. In a 1924 article he categorized Omaha’s Mexicans as “mentally lazy,” “vindictive,” and among those whose “ambitions are not high.”<sup>50</sup> S. F. Secord, whose husband was a Baptist

missionary, stated, “Mexicans are childlike. They have to be taught to save money and have something of their own.”<sup>51</sup> Even children reinforced discriminatory attitudes towards ethnic Mexicans as they spit on children of Mexican descent and called them “greasers” at school and church gatherings.<sup>52</sup> The labeling of Mexicans as inferior and different combined with Mexican economic vulnerability led social workers to target ethnic Mexicans as a problem in Omaha.

Neighborhood House staff also partially segregated Mexicans, marking their difference from both European immigrants and African Americans. Unlike African Americans, whom the Social Settlement Association segregated to the Woodson House settlement, Mexicans had access to the South Omaha community resources of the Neighborhood House. But Neighborhood House staff highlighted Mexican foreignness by designating certain classes and clubs only for Mexicans. From 1928 through the first half of the 1930s, and then again in the early 1940s, clubs and classes included the Mexican Club, the Mexican Boys Club, Mexican Boy’s Health, Mexican Girl’s Health, Mexican Mother’s Sewing, Mexican Youth Club, and The Aztec Club.<sup>53</sup> It is unclear if the Mexican segregated clubs and classes were the product of ethnic tensions, language barriers, or Mexican choice, but Neighborhood House staff did not provide clubs based on nationality for people of European descent. Mexicans straddled a line of in-between-ness, where they attended school and worked alongside their neighbors, but were also viewed as different because of their national origin.<sup>54</sup>

Ethnic Mexicans in western Nebraska also contended with economic vulnerability and discrimination. Economic necessity forced many students to quit school early or fall behind in their studies. The agricultural season did not align with Nebraska’s public school year. As a result, many ethnic Mexican children missed weeks of school as they worked during spring and fall in sugar beet fields. Ascencio Rivera moved nearly every summer between Omaha and the Nebraska Panhandle in the 1920s and the 1930s. Rivera quit school in the tenth grade to work more and help his family during the mid-1930s. Rivera also happened to be in a different town nearly every summer as his father found work for the family.<sup>55</sup> Paul DeLuna, too, recalled the difficulty that the beet season placed on Mexican children. DeLuna remembered how many students struggled to catch up after missing most of the fall portion of the school year.<sup>56</sup>



**C. M. Gaxiola, Mexican Consul of Kansas City, August 15, 1931. At the time, Omaha lacked its own Mexican Consulate.**  
HN RG3882-PH52-330

John Arredondo, who migrated between Wichita Falls, Texas, and Hershey, Nebraska, also quit school because of the difficulty he had catching up on missed schoolwork.<sup>57</sup>

Public officials exacerbated these problems by treating immigrant groups differently. Truant officers and other school officials took more interest in German-Russian children who also worked in the sugar beet region of western Nebraska. School officials battled with German-Russian parents to keep their children in school, but did not make such an effort on behalf of Mexican children.<sup>58</sup>

At times, western Nebraska public institutions and owners of public accommodations enforced segregation. Sam Franco, a Mexican American who grew up in western Nebraska and who lives in Nebraska to this day, remembers attending Lincoln Elementary, a segregated school for Mexicans, African Americans, and Native Americans in Minatare during the 1940s. He recalled that there was one teacher in one room for first through sixth grade.<sup>59</sup> Around the same time, Minatare officials codified residential segregation in 1941 when a “city ordinance barred ‘any person or persons of Mexican blood or race’ from occupying or owning property outside a four-block area.”<sup>60</sup> Racial discrimination continued to limit access to common community resources even after World War II. Nadine Dilts, a long-term Mexican-American resident of western Nebraska, attended a movie with her parents circa 1949 in Mitchell. Ushers insisted Nadine’s mom sit on the side of the theater for Mexicans, while Nadine and her father could sit in the center because they looked white.<sup>61</sup>

Religious leadership in Nebraska also limited Mexican community access to ecclesiastical resources. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Omaha refused Mexican petitions for a Spanish-speaking priest in 1918 and continually denied support for a Mexican church until 1944. Mexicans in Omaha had to fund the establishment of Our Lady of Guadalupe on their own, resulting in a temporary church at an old bakery from 1919 until 1923. Then, the community founded another storefront version of Our Lady of Guadalupe from 1928 until 1951, when, with support from the Catholic Church and community members, the current location was opened.<sup>62</sup>

Decisions by Catholic leadership in western Nebraska similarly limited Mexican ability to practice their faith. In 1936, there were six mission churches in the North Platte Valley of Nebraska—Scottsbluff, Minatare, Bayard, Morrill, Mitchell,

and Lyman—with two priests and four sisters that served 500 families.<sup>63</sup> These six missions reported a significant drop in Mexican attendance from June through late fall because most families left their winter homes to work on nearby ranches, which were too far for church attendance.<sup>64</sup> Rather than establish permanent churches, the Catholic hierarchy formed rotating missions, which could only serve so many residents at a time.

Ethnic Mexican community cooperation overcame the limited resources afforded them by the church hierarchy. Ethnic Mexicans furnished their own spaces for religious expression and community cohesion, sometimes by transforming commercial establishments. Migrants of Mexican descent in the Panhandle rented out pool halls and other spaces, brought in their own benches and chairs, and quickly prepared them for Mass. They covered tables with white cloth for the foundation of an altar, then added flowers and candles. Families loaned pictures and statues to complete the altar and create an acceptable place for religious worship.<sup>65</sup> Trinidad and John Valdez, who moved seasonally between Omaha and western Nebraska, noted that non-Catholic traveling ministers often came through small farm towns. The ministers rented out halls and held services for ethnic Mexicans to attend.<sup>66</sup>

As ethnic Mexicans grappled with obstacles that hindered the growth of permanent community institutions, the Great Depression diminished economic opportunities. Ethnic Mexicans reliant on agricultural work appeared to be hit the hardest. Beet workers turned to the Kansas City consulate in the spring of 1930 after they did not receive their pay from the 1929 beet season. The consulate contacted the Scottsbluff-based district manager of the Great Western Sugar Company, which contracted with area farmers who hired Mexican agricultural workers. Area farmers had defaulted on loan payments because of 1929’s bad harvest, which was then compounded by the failure of the Bank of Bayard after the stock market crash in October. Nebraskan courts favored the bank rather than the laborers, forcing farmers to use any funds to pay back the lien on the harvest rather than the wages owed to laborers. Consul Vazquez of Kansas City corresponded with the Great Western Sugar Company in hopes of gaining the back wages for his compatriots. The company established a loan system for the 1930 harvest; this improved chances that wages would be paid, but the agreement still lacked guarantees satisfactory to the laborers.<sup>67</sup> Ethnic Mexican laborers hoped the Kansas City

consulate could protect them and counter a US court decision that protected banks, but this failure signaled increasing hardship to come.

Ethnic Mexicans feared they could not survive in Nebraska as families remained unemployed in the early 1930s. In May 1932, the Denver consul reported that because employment opportunities had not improved, 100 families from Scottsbluff would be repatriated through Denver to El Paso.<sup>68</sup> In April and May of the same year, a large group of ethnic Mexicans wrote the head of the Mexican consular department to request the repatriation of 300 families because of unfavorable work contracts and horrendous living conditions. Jose Infante, who wrote the letter, complained that agricultural laborers could not even feed their families on current wage scales and that the Great Western Sugar Company and area farmers changed contract conditions after laborers signed them. As the correspondence made its way through Mexican bureaucratic channels, Consul Gaxiola of Kansas City informed the office of the Secretary of Foreign Relations that he had been in touch with Bartolo Augilar, president of the *Comisión Honorífica Mexicana* in Minatare. Despite foreign dignitaries, employers, and community members searching for a solution, not much was done to help ethnic Mexican sugar beet workers. The effort concluded with Consul Gaxiola writing to the office of the Secretary of Foreign Relations that the remaining families would have to wait out the harvest and reapply for repatriation in November 1932.<sup>69</sup>

Nearly a quarter of Nebraska's 6,000-plus Mexican population was repatriated between 1930 and 1932, as more than 1,500 Mexicans departed Nebraska for destinations in Mexico.<sup>70</sup> This does not include families that may have repatriated from other locations, such as the 75-100 families of Scotts Bluff County who were repatriated through Denver in 1932. Southwestern states with major Mexican populations did not see as large of a proportion of their populations repatriated between 1930 and 1932: of these, Texas was highest at 19 percent; California and Colorado each lost 14 percent. Yet in the nation as a whole, Nebraska did not suffer the most severe population decline, as Illinois lost nearly half its Mexican population and Indiana lost 70 percent.<sup>71</sup> While a sizeable community remained in Nebraska, it was not inevitable that Mexicans would withstand the economic pressures of the Great Depression.

According to consular reports in the second half of 1933, employment conditions stabilized in the beet fields, but hardship persisted amid a climate



of increasing nativism.<sup>72</sup> As many laborers wrapped up harvest work and received their last paycheck of the year in November, they prepared to head to Mexico by train or automobile. According to the Mexican consulate in Kansas City, 9 percent of Nebraska's Mexican population repatriated in 1933. Moreover, at the beginning of 1934, the consulate reported that as many as 128 Mexicans still needed repatriation because of a lack of work. Overall, Nebraska's Mexican population had been reduced to 2,760 by 1934, a loss of more than 50 percent in four years.<sup>73</sup>

Those who remained continued to move between Omaha and western Nebraska, a pattern of mobility that had proven reliable before the Depression. Omaha contained no more than a third of Nebraska's ethnic Mexican population by 1930, the highpoint of the prewar Nebraska Mexican population. Depending on the time of year, the ethnic Mexican population of Omaha shifted dramatically. It was around 500 in 1936,

**A man dressed in traditional Mexican clothing presents a flag to Mayor James Dahlman at Omaha City Hall, ca. 1925. HN RG3882-PH45-19-3**



**Consulting homemakers at an Omaha Mexican household, ca. 1935.**

Federal Emergency Relief Administration, HN RG4290-PHO-504

climbing to 2,000 that winter.<sup>74</sup> In 1937, the population was counted anywhere between 1,000 and 2,000.<sup>75</sup> Workers at the Neighborhood House noted the influx of Mexican immigrants during the winter months of the mid-1930s. In 1934 Miss Gauss worried about the destitute conditions of ethnic Mexicans in Omaha and wanted the organization to give special attention to these families.<sup>76</sup> One WPA interviewee mentioned how his family stopped going west during the summer in the early 1930s and how hard it was to find work in Omaha.<sup>77</sup> The lack of work and the increasing frequency of repatriation severely weakened Nebraska's ethnic Mexican community. Nonetheless, a web of interethnic exchange, familial work, and high mobility ensured that many ethnic Mexicans persevered through the worst of the Depression.

**Tools of Persistence**

Ethnic Mexicans turned to social resources, Mexican culture, and gatherings to stabilize their statewide community during the Great Depression and into the early years of World War II. Mexicans in Omaha pursued integration into multiethnic institutions while continuing to build their own

organizations. These efforts grew into sustained expressions of Mexican culture and community bonding. Similar activities occurred in western Nebraska as cultural celebrations such as dances and Mexican national holidays brought disparate residences under the same roof to embrace their national past.

Ethnic Mexicans adapted existing worker and social institutions near their homes. They organized a number of events at the Butchers' and Workman's Temple on South 25th street in Omaha. According to WPA reports, they used the temple for dances, club meetings, lectures, and other events during the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> The Mexican Mutual Society (MMS) held meetings there as well before purchasing their own hall on Q Street sometime after the MMS reformed their constitution in 1928.<sup>79</sup>

Ethnic Mexicans also shared cultural space, which made Omaha resources more available while increasing opportunities for interethnic cooperation. Along with the many other ethnic groups of South Omaha, ethnic Mexicans participated in the International Folk Arts Society hosted through the Social Settlement Association's Neighborhood House. Attendees of the Neighborhood House created the International

Folk Arts Society in 1926. As many as seventeen different nationalities participated in the many Society-sponsored performances and festivals over the years. Throughout the 1930s the Society encouraged friendly relations and “pride of race” as different ethnic groups demonstrated customs from their home country.<sup>80</sup> In May 1936 the Society held a ten-year anniversary special in which twenty-eight Mexicans performed. Some danced the Jarabe, a national dance. Others sang “Ranche Grande,” which a WPA writer claimed “has almost become a Mexican national anthem.” The writer also lauded Mexican performances as “a riot of color and melody... well worth attending.”<sup>81</sup>

South Omaha Mexicans hosted clubs and dances at the Neighborhood House to limit marginalization. The monthly reports of the Social Settlement Association reveal a small yet active group of Mexican participants in clubs and classes from 1928 through the early 1940s. The Mexican Youth Club of the Neighborhood House often held parties, and there were monthly Mexican dances during the winter and early spring months of the 1930s. In April 1932, the Neighborhood House hosted “A Mexican Fair,” which a staff report claimed “brought together most of the Mexican Colony.”<sup>82</sup> Sharing cultural celebrations with other ethnic groups increased Mexican access to Omaha institutions while fortifying bonds among the Mexican community.

For mobile ethnic Mexicans, temporary use of urban institutions helped maintain community with limited resources. At the Neighborhood House of South Omaha, clubs and classes decreased during the prime farming months of spring and summer when ethnic Mexican activity was almost non-existent.<sup>83</sup> Ethnic Mexicans recognized its social and cultural importance even as they balanced it with economic needs.

The fixity of pre-existing US community institutions required ethnic Mexican migrants to embrace Mexican governmental institutions and Mexican national identity.<sup>84</sup> One such response was the formation of local *Comisiones Honoríficas Mexicanas*, patriotic organizations organized through the Mexican consular service. The *Comisión Honorífica* served a range of purposes that included social services, cultural activities, and employment protection. The *Comisión Honorífica* of Scottsbluff crafted a patriotic Mexican community in the area by writing their consulate and the office of the Secretary of Foreign Relations (SRE) for pictures of then president, Pascual Ortiz Rubio. Commission letters also requested books

and articles to inform Commission members how to best serve their country. When Consul Gaxiola of Kansas City visited Scottsbluff, Bayard, and other Mexican *colonias* in Nebraska later in 1931, he also wrote the office of the SRE to ask if patriotic materials had been sent to the Scottsbluff *Comisión Honorífica*. Gaxiola wrote that the community sought to “be in spiritual contact with the homeland.”<sup>85</sup> In these moments, Mexicans embraced their national identity as a tool of social cohesion.

Competing organizations battled over the meaning of this national identity. Soon after Consul Gaxiola’s May 1931 visit to western Nebraska, Luis Vera, Secretary of the *Comisión Honorífica* of Minatare, wrote Gaxiola complaining of the *Comité Patriótico* because they competed with the commission over celebrating *fiestas patrias*.<sup>86</sup> *Fiestas patrias* were Mexican holidays celebrating patriotic events such as Mexican Independence Day. The *Comité Patriótico*, led by Jose Infante, wrote protesting the *Comisión Honorífica* as an organization that intruded on the town of Minatare. Infante and his fellow members believed that they were no longer subject to Mexican law, writing: “WE DO NOT OBSERVE THE MEXICAN LAWS... BUT RATHER ONLY SUM UP A RESPECT FOR THE LAWS OF THE UNITED STATES” (emphasis theirs).<sup>87</sup> Members of the *Comité Patriótico* used the *fiestas patrias* for social cohesion around Mexican identity, while recognizing their attachment to the United States in opposition to outside Mexican interference.

The importance of *fiestas patrias* and Mexican gatherings was reflected in the willingness of ethnic Mexicans to travel long distances for them. While the Omaha community could celebrate Mexican Independence Day at the Neighborhood House or host dances at the Butchers’ and Workman’s Temple, in western Nebraska people traveled to larger towns to celebrate *fiestas patrias* and gathered in larger numbers. Seasonal and permanent residents of Lincoln County traveled to dances in Hershey and Sutherland, even Scottsbluff.<sup>88</sup> Mobility supported cultural expression, aiding community perseverance following years of repatriation.

Ethnic Mexicans celebrated Mexican Independence Day (September 16) throughout Nebraska. Often these celebrations carried over two days. Mexicans working on farms traveled to larger towns, and throughout the state there were speeches, parades, and dances to commemorate the beginning of the Mexican battle

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**A Mexican woman and her six children, Omaha, August 15, 1922.** HN RG3882-PH21-163

for independence from Spain in 1810. While living in North Platte in the 1930s, Tony Acosta traveled to Scottsbluff and Grand Island to celebrate the holiday.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps in his travels to Scottsbluff, he came across Nadine Dilts and her family during the *fiestas patrias*. Nadine, born in Gering and of Mexican descent, remembered giving a speech in Spanish at a very young age, with the help of her Grandpa Huerta, during an Independence Day celebration.<sup>90</sup> Many WPA reports, as well as oral histories collected by History Nebraska in the 1990s, describe vibrant celebrations of Mexican Independence Day.

Dances were common at *fiestas patrias* and other gatherings, and were often held monthly throughout the state. Ethnic Mexicans not only held monthly dances at the Neighborhood House

in Omaha, but also occasionally at the Butchers' and Workman's Temple.<sup>91</sup> Dances were also common in agricultural towns, as ethnic Mexicans left their farms to meet with compatriots from across the region. In the 1930s and 1940s, both ethnic Mexicans and observers commented on the Mexican hat dance, where they "dance on the big hat."<sup>92</sup>

Holidays, dances, and community togetherness would be incomplete without another common thread that tied Nebraskan Mexicans to Mexico, to the Southwest, and to each other: food. Felix Rivera of North Platte happily discussed the special meals he received—hot tamales for Christmas dinner and enchiladas whenever anyone had a birthday. Rivera said they cooked Mexican dishes so they would not forget "the old country."<sup>93</sup> Bob Huerta and Juanita Garcia, who opened Taco Town in Scottsbluff in 1968 (and earlier incarnations in the 1940s and 1950s), highlighted the food their mother had made when they were growing up in Nebraska in the 1930s.<sup>94</sup> Other migrants remembered the recipes they brought from Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup> Foodways allowed for the personal and public expression of Mexican culture as neighbors and family shared meals.

Despite economic, social, and political hurdles, ethnic Mexicans continued the practices of early years of community formation and introduced new ways of relating to each other. Repatriations and worsening economic conditions did not damage the statewide community beyond repair. Mobility and cultural expression reinforced each other throughout the state, allowing community bonds to flourish, and insulating Nebraska's Mexican community against marginalization.

### Here to Stay

Mexican persistence and creation during the 1920s and 1930s laid the foundation for future generations of ethnic Mexicans and Latinas/os to gain access to economic and political capital in Nebraska. Most telling is the establishment of the Nebraska Commission on Mexican Americans in 1972, now known as the Latino American Commission.<sup>96</sup> A populous Latina/o community resides in South Omaha, and *El Museo Latino* highlights Latina/o history in the state and the country. History Nebraska sponsored a project in the 1990s that recorded oral histories and published a bilingual report about the state's Mexican cultural heritage. There is also a long-standing Mexican-American Museum in Scottsbluff. These are only a few of

the developments of the last half of the twentieth century that owe a debt to the formative years of Mexican communities in Nebraska.<sup>97</sup>

Nebraska's Latina/o population continues to grow. Towns that had no history of non-European immigrants became majority Latina/o almost overnight. For example, Schuyler began 1990 with a population that was only 4 percent Latina/o, but continued migration transformed the town with Schuyler becoming 42 percent Latina/o in 2000 and 65 percent in 2010.<sup>98</sup> Many of Nebraska's towns and cities have large Latina/o communities, such as Lexington, Grand Island, and Hastings. Some estimates predict that Latinas/os will make up nearly a quarter of Nebraska's population by 2050.<sup>99</sup>

Looking back, it was not so clear that ethnic Mexicans would remain in Nebraska. Ethnic Mexicans inhabited a unique space in Nebraska, the Midwest, and the United States that during the first half of the twentieth century could not guarantee their access to resources for community survival. Urban centers such as Omaha as well as agricultural communities such as Scottsbluff provided the foundation for organizations and cultural celebrations to grow and unify the Mexican community. Ethnic Mexicans—sometimes with the help of Anglos and European immigrants, at other times in opposition to them—built a community founded on mobility, cooperation, and cultural adaptation. 📍

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Ramirez, Interview, September 21, 1996, Mexican-American Folklife Project, Nebraska State Historical Society (aka, History Nebraska).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term regional community from Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Lizabeth Cohen presents a compelling argument about the collapsing of ethnic difference in the working-class neighborhoods of Chicago. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Anna Pegler-Gordon summarizes recent scholarly debates about ethnic assimilation and ideas of race in immigration history. Anna Pegler-Gordon, "Debating the Racial Turn in U.S. Ethnic and Immigration History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 2 (2017): 40–53.

<sup>4</sup> For other examples of how migration creates and sustains community, see: Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge*; Delia Fernández, "Rethinking the Urban and Rural Divide in Latino Labor, Recreation, and Activism in West Michigan,

1940s–1970s," *Labor History* 57, no. 4 (October 2016): 482–503.

<sup>5</sup> At times, I use the term Mexican when it is clear Mexican nationals are discussed. I sparingly use the term Mexican American because people of Mexican descent were often perceived as foreign even if they were American citizens. This is best evidenced by the mass deportations and repatriations during the Great Depression that plagued Mexican communities across the United States, when federal and local officials and Euro-Americans had little regard for the citizenship status of ethnic Mexicans. For repatriation and deportation, see: Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Juan Ramon García, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974). For the racialization of Mexicans as illegal, see: Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For Mexican-American War, the racial implications of the war, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, see: Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009); William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> For Mexican migration motivations and the social relations of the Southwest, see: Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920*, Yale Western Americana Series 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*; Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans*; Foley, *The White Scourge*.

<sup>9</sup> Sánchez gives a good synopsis of the various factors contributing to Mexican migration during this period, Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 19–22. Porfirian-era policies consolidated Mexican land holdings, often driving Mexican agricultural workers to northern Mexico and the southwest United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. For more information on Porfirian policies and the Mexican Revolution, see: Michael J.

Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002). Benjamin Johnson gives an example of how the Mexican Revolution exacerbated racial tensions. Johnson also demonstrates how Anglo-Americans discriminated against Mexicans through disfranchisement and segregation in south Texas. Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States Migration Statistics. IV* (Berkeley: University of California Publications in Economics, 1934); US Census Bureau, "Total Population, Nebraska. Prepared by Social Explorer," 1930.

<sup>11</sup> George Sánchez explains how Mexican social organization and cultural production in response to Americanization efforts and discrimination created a new Mexican-American identity during the early-twentieth century. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*. David Gutiérrez has defined Mexican social and cultural adaptations to counter the pressures of marginalization within the United States as "third space." David G. Gutiérrez, "Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the 'Third Space': The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (1999): 487–89. Michael Innis-Jiménez also uses Gutiérrez's "third space" and has influenced my understanding of the term. Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 10–11. I also stress the importance of social and cultural adaptation to the construction of an ethnic Mexican community, but do not place this process in Nebraska firmly in either camp.

<sup>12</sup> Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 10; My understanding of community is also influenced by Gutiérrez, "Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the 'Third Space'"; Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge*; Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*; Monroy, *Rebirth*; Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Marne L. Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850-1917* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> For pre-WWII Mexican communities in the Midwest, see: Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); García, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*; Jeffrey Marcos Garcilazo and Vicki Ruíz, *Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States, 1870 to 1930* (Denton, Tex: UNT Press, 2012); Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*; Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jim Norris, *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009); Kathleen Mapes, *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Judith Ann Fincher Laird, "Argentine, Kansas: The Evolution of a Mexican-American Community, 1905-1940." (Ph.D., University of Kansas, 1975); Valerie Marie Mendoza, "The Creation of a Mexican Immigrant Community in

Kansas City, 1890-1930" (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> For labor contractors, see: Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); For Mexican agricultural communities in Nebraska and the plains, see: Dennis Nodín Valdés, "Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940," *Great Plains Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1990): 110–23; Michael Smith, "Beyond the Borderlands: Mexican Labor in the Central Plains, 1900-1930," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1981): 239–51, doi:10.2307/23530524; For the multiethnic makeup of Omaha and other Midwestern meatpacking districts, see: Wilson J. Warren, *Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2007), 50–57.

<sup>15</sup> T. Earl Sullenger, "The Mexican Population of Omaha," *Journal of Applied Sociology* 8 (June 1924): 292; Valdés explains the development of Mexicans working agricultural fields during the spring and summer and then living in urban centers during the winter across the Midwest. Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 48–51.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Huerta, Interview, September 13, 1996, Mexican-American Folklife Project.

<sup>17</sup> "The Immigrant in Omaha" n.d., WPA, Federal Writers' Project, box 35, folder 1, Nebraska State Historical Society (aka, History Nebraska).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> The Gibson neighborhood was located between the Missouri River and Riverview Boulevard, and between Bancroft and Grover streets, near where railroad yards still stand today.

<sup>20</sup> George T. Edson, "Mexicans in Omaha, Nebraska," 1927, Paul Schuster Taylor papers, BANC MSS 84/38c, microfilm, carton 13, folder 33, Bancroft Library, University of California.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Gonzalez, St. Louis County Historian, first brought this phenomenon to my attention as we discussed his research in St. Louis. Gonzalez argues in our discussions and his public lectures that the St. Louis, Mexican community of the early-twentieth century lived among various immigrant groups across the city. He also emphasizes how this is different than the barrioization often fixed to scholarly discussions of Mexican community formation. For barrioization in the Southwest, see: Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> "Omaha Colonia to Ambassador Bonillas," October 10, 1919, Folder 592-38, Archivo de la Embajada de México en los Estados Unidos de América; The Amado Nervo was a mutual society and the Comité Patriótico was a patriotic organization. The Comité Cático Central may have been the organizing committee behind the first incarnation of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Omaha, though it is not clear. María Arbelaez explains the early stages of establishing a Mexican church in Omaha in María Arbelaez, "Religion and Community: Mexican Americans in South Omaha (1900-1980)" (Omaha, NE: Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> For Mexican organizations, see: Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 108–28; For Mexican organizations in the Midwest, see: Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 67–80; In Chicago, see: Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 102–31.

<sup>24</sup> Nina L. Nixon, “The Mexican American Settlement of Omaha, Report to the Omaha City Planning Department” August 17, 1979, Mexican-American Commission Papers, subgroup 2, box 3, folder 11, History Nebraska.

<sup>25</sup> Juan García explains how Mexican consulates appointed members to the Honorary Commission to serve the local Mexican community. García, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 124–27.

<sup>26</sup> Signees included office holders of four different local Mexican organizations and 183 community members, “Omaha Colonia to Ambassador Bonillas”; It is unclear if the population count is accurate. The 1920 census recorded 682 Mexicans in Omaha, with the population only hitting 1,000 in 1923, as found in Sullenger, “The Mexican Population of Omaha.”

<sup>27</sup> Local 602 was labeled as a Mexican Union in the letter and was under the umbrella of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher’s Workmen of North America.

<sup>28</sup> “Multiple Letters,” 1919 1920, Folder 592-38, Archivo de la Embajada de México en los Estados Unidos de América.

<sup>29</sup> George T. Edson, “North Central States,” 1927 1926, Paul Schuster Taylor papers, BANC MSS 84/38c, microfilm, carton 13, folder 38, Bancroft Library, University of California.

<sup>30</sup> George T. Edson, “Sugar Beet Workers,” 1927, Paul Schuster Taylor papers, BANC MSS 84/38c, microfilm, carton 13, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California.

<sup>31</sup> Valdés discusses Mexican communities across the Midwest, the relationship between employment and residences, and the common occurrence of regional urban-rural migrations prior to World War II. Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 22–64.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Acosta, WPA Interview, August 1, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 11, folder 1, History Nebraska; John Arredondo, WPA Interview, August 14, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 11, folder 1; Trinidad and John Valdez, WPA Interview, July 16, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 12, folder 10; Ascencio Rivera, WPA Interview, April 10, 1941, WPA Interviews, box 7.

<sup>33</sup> Edson, “Sugar Beet Workers.”

<sup>34</sup> Ray Cunningham, “Spanish, Douglas County” August 21, 1936, WPA, Federal Writers’ Project, box 37.

<sup>35</sup> Matt García describes how Americanization efforts influenced stereotypes of Mexicans as inferior to Americans in Southern California during the first half of the twentieth century. Matt García, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 69–75, 98–114; George Sánchez explains how Americanization efforts revealed incorrect assumptions about Mexican life in Los Angeles. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 87–107; Michael Innis-Jiménez describes Americanization efforts in South Chicago and how some believed Mexicans were incapable of assimilation because of their continued use of Spanish. Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 86–99. For other works that explain how Americanization and assimilation efforts impacted Mexican

communities in the Midwest, see: Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*; Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*.

<sup>36</sup> L. L. Campbell, “Scottsbluff Report” May 1, 1936, WPA, Federal Writer’s Project, box 38, folder 1.

<sup>37</sup> L. L. Campbell, “Ethnography” May 13, 1936, WPA, Federal Writer’s Project, box 35, folder 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Monthly Report,” March 1, 1934, Social Settlement Association of Omaha papers, subgroup 2, series 4, folder 2, History Nebraska. The full quote is: “A number of families have moved into the neighborhood, whose extreme poverty and ignorance of all hygiene, has led our CWS nurse to approach their problem as a special project. She is going into their wretched homes as a visiting housekeeper and nurse combined and is getting good response.”

<sup>39</sup> Sullenger, “The Mexican Population of Omaha.”

<sup>40</sup> “Multiple Monthly Reports, 1928-1935,” 1928 1935, Social Settlement Association of Omaha Papers.

<sup>41</sup> “Monthly Report,” March 1, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Alexandra Minna Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (1999): 41–81.

<sup>44</sup> Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*.

<sup>45</sup> Edson, “Mexicans in Omaha, Nebraska.”

<sup>46</sup> Sullenger, “The Mexican Population of Omaha,” 292.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Escobar demonstrates how the relationships between police and Mexicans created racial difference and hindered the Mexican community in Los Angeles prior to World War II. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*. Gabriela Arredondo explains how Chicago’s legal system treated Mexicans differently than other immigrants in the city, often arresting Mexicans without pressing charges. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*, 64–70.

<sup>48</sup> Some scholars have demonstrated how law enforcement racialize ethnic groups as undesirable, foreign, and dangerous. Delia Fernández demonstrates this process in Michigan. Delia Fernández, “Becoming Latino: Mexican and Puerto Rican Community Formation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1926–1964,” *Michigan Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (2013): 71–100. Lee and Hernández are foundational studies of the power of law enforcement to racialize immigrants as dangerous and illegal. Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Hernández, *Migra!*

<sup>49</sup> Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 19–20; Edson, “Mexicans in Omaha, Nebraska.”

<sup>50</sup> Sullenger, “The Mexican Population of Omaha.”

<sup>51</sup> Edson, “Mexicans in Omaha, Nebraska.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Secord stated: “In the social gatherings of the schools and churches Mexican children were spat upon and called ‘greasers’ by other children.”

- <sup>53</sup> “Multiple Monthly Reports, 1928-1935.”
- <sup>54</sup> James R. Barrett and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (1997): 3–44.
- <sup>55</sup> Rivera, WPA Interview.
- <sup>56</sup> Paul DeLuna, WPA Interview, August 12, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 11, folder 7.
- <sup>57</sup> Arredondo, WPA Interview.
- <sup>58</sup> Valdés, “Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940,” 114–15.
- <sup>59</sup> Sam Franco, Interview with Author, August 15, 2017.
- <sup>60</sup> Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 161.
- <sup>61</sup> Nadine Dilts, Interview, September 13, 1996, Mexican-American Folklife Project.
- <sup>62</sup> Arbelaez, “Religion and Community: Mexican Americans in South Omaha (1900-1980),” 15–18.
- <sup>63</sup> Campbell, “Scottsbluff Report.”
- <sup>64</sup> Campbell, “Ethnography.”
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Valdez, WPA Interview.
- <sup>67</sup> “Multiple Letters,” 1930, Folder 1450-23, Archivo de la Embajada de México en los Estados Unidos de América.
- <sup>68</sup> “Denver Consul to Office of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores,” May 1932, Folder IV-354-40, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
- <sup>69</sup> “Multiple Letters,” 1932, Folder IV-547-1, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
- <sup>70</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States Migration Statistics. IV*, 45.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 34–35, 45. I calculated these percentages using Taylor’s population and repatriation statistics.
- <sup>72</sup> Much of the literature listed in note 5 referencing Mexican repatriation and deportation describes the climate of anti-Mexican attitudes and rising nativism during the first half of the twentieth century. Other works that demonstrate the rise of US nativism and hardening borders include: Lee, *At America’s Gates*; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Hernández, *Migra!*; Kornel S. Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- <sup>73</sup> “Kansas City Consulate Annual Report,” 1933, Folder IV-647-11, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores The consulate report records Nebraska’s Mexican population as 3,025 at the start of 1933 and reduced to 2,760 by the start of 1924, with more repatriations needed. The majority of the repatriations came from western Nebraska, though Omaha’s rate of repatriation was comparative to the rural areas of Nebraska.
- <sup>74</sup> Cunningham, “Spanish, Douglas County.”
- <sup>75</sup> Robert Curran, “Racial Elements” March 15, 1937, WPA, Federal Writers’ Project, box 35, folder 1.
- <sup>76</sup> “Multiple Monthly Reports, 1928-1935.”
- <sup>77</sup> Rivera, WPA Interview.
- <sup>78</sup> Cunningham, “Spanish, Douglas County”; Curran, “Racial Elements.”
- <sup>79</sup> Nixon, “The Mexican American Settlement of Omaha, Report to the Omaha City Planning Department,” 8–9. Nixon does not give an exact date, but states the building was purchased after 1928 and before membership declined in the 1950s.
- <sup>80</sup> Robert Curran and Gould, “Customs of Foreigners in Omaha” July 16, 1936, WPA, Federal Writer’s Project, box 35, folder 1.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> “Monthly Report,” May 1932, Social Settlement Association of Omaha papers, subgroup 2, series 4, folder 2.
- <sup>83</sup> “Multiple Monthly Reports, 1928-1935.”
- <sup>84</sup> Mexicans turned to their home country as source of cohesion and protection. Sometimes this manifested itself in embracing a Mexican national identity, like Gabriela Arredondo demonstrates in Chicago. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*. Other times, Mexicans called on the Mexican government to protect them rather than the institutions of the United States. Julie Weise describes this process in southern cotton fields. Julie M. Weise, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
- <sup>85</sup> “Multiple Letters,” 1931, Folder IV-339-4, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
- <sup>86</sup> “Luis Vera to Carlos Gaxiola,” May 31, 1931, Folder IV-339-4, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
- <sup>87</sup> “Jose Infante to Gabino Correa,” August 29, 1931, Folder IV-339-4, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.
- <sup>88</sup> Valdez, WPA Interview; Acosta, WPA Interview; Arredondo, WPA Interview; Delores Fernandez, WPA Interview, July 30, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 11, folder 7.
- <sup>89</sup> Acosta, WPA Interview.
- <sup>90</sup> Dilts, Interview.
- <sup>91</sup> Nixon, “The Mexican American Settlement of Omaha, Report to the Omaha City Planning Department,” 8.
- <sup>92</sup> Acosta, WPA Interview; Valdez, WPA Interview; Curran and Gould, “Customs of Foreigners in Omaha.”
- <sup>93</sup> M. C. Rivera Family, WPA Interview, 1940, WPA Interviews, box 12, folder 6.
- <sup>94</sup> Huerta, Interview; Bob Huerta and Garcia, Jenny, Interview, May 21, 1996, Mexican-American Folklife Project.
- <sup>95</sup> Juvencia Reyes, Interview, April 9, 1997, Mexican-American Folklife Project; Andres Flores, Interview, October 1996, Mexican-American Folklife Project; *Our Treasures: A Collection of Nebraska’s Mexican Heritage* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society and Mexican American Commission, 1998), 27, 31–36.

<sup>96</sup> Roger P. Davis, "'Service Not Power': The Early Years of the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans, 1971-1975," *Nebraska History* 89, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 68.

<sup>97</sup> For more recent history of Mexican Americans in Nebraska, see: Davis, "'Service Not Power': The Early Years of the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans, 1971-1975"; Roger P. Davis, "Latinos Along the Platte: The Hispanic Experience in Central Nebraska," *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences* 12 (Spring 2001): 27-50; Roger P. Davis, "The Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans at the Crossroads: The Dilemma of False Expectations - Neither Service nor Power, 1973-1980," *Nebraska History*, Spring 2015, 27-41; *Our Treasures: A Collection of Nebraska's Mexican Heritage*.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Sanchez, "Negotiating Latino Immigrant Identity in Rural Nebraska," *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies* 3, No. 4 (September 2009): 115-57; Art Hovey, "Hispanics a Headline Grabber in Census Results," *Lincoln Journal Star*, March 1, 2011, [https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/hispanics-a-headline-grabber-in-census-results/article\\_91216529-9622-5b04-890e-8cb303e9c028.html](https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/hispanics-a-headline-grabber-in-census-results/article_91216529-9622-5b04-890e-8cb303e9c028.html)

<sup>99</sup> Mike Tobias, "Nebraska's Hispanic/Latino Population Could Triple by 2050," *NET News*, August 20, 2013, <http://netnebraska.org/article/news/nebraskas-hispaniclatino-population-could-triple-2050>