

Migrant Tejano Laborers in Wisconsin between 1950 and 1970: Effects of an Exclusionary New Deal

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Abstract

The Great Depression was a tumultuous period in American history that ushered in an era of tremendous social change in the form of the New Deal. Policies of the era, such as the Wagner Act, formally recognized laborers’ rights to organize. Consequently, laborers in the industrial and manufacturing sectors engaged in collective bargaining with the support of the government and strong unions. Their efforts improved working conditions and wages and most laborers began to make up a flourishing middle class in America. However, the Wagner Act did not extend these protections to agricultural workers, who sank further into poverty.

This essay focuses on the life and working conditions of migrant Hispanic agricultural workers in Wisconsin between 1950 and 1970. In particular, the paper examines the dangers that these migrants faced while traveling to and from Wisconsin, the inadequate housing the employers provided for them, and the poor wages they received for their labor. This research also includes an examination of the children of migrant workers, child labor, and the lack of education available to them. Based on this analysis, I argue that agricultural laborers’ exemption from the Wagner Act resulted in deplorable conditions for migrant agricultural workers in Wisconsin, who were trapped in a cycle of poverty and ethnic discrimination.

Introduction

At the onset of the Great Depression, wages earned by industrial, manufacturing, and agricultural laborers were comparable, with agricultural laborers earning as much as 70 percent of wages earned by other laborers. However, after the Great Depression and the implementation of New Deal programs, agricultural laborers were earning less than 40 percent of that earned by their counterparts in the industrial and manufacturing sectors.¹ This clearly identifies the Great Depression as a divergence point whereby the standard of living for agricultural laborers experienced a stark decline in comparison with laborers in other sectors. Dennis Valdés, a professor of history and Chicano studies, explains that the New Deal era represented a distinct but fleeting moment in

history when laborers in each of these sectors could have been united and all could have benefited from organized union representation. He explains that at the time the “segments of the working class had much in common, diverse ethnic backgrounds, militancy, the security of relatively stable residence, and common urban work experiences.”² These shared characteristics were conducive to creating unity amongst all laborers.

Supporters of New Deal programs needed congressional support to pass the legislation that recognized the laborers’ rights to organize. The Wagner Act was not written with the intent of excluding agricultural laborers. But in order for it to become law, it needed the support of the powerful and united southern Democrats who represented the interests of the most powerful factions of the agricultural sector. These representatives were willing to support the Wagner Act for the industrial sector, but not at the expense of agricultural interests and certainly not at the expense of upsetting the status quo in regards to race relations in the south. It was the pressure of southern Democrats in Congress that resulted in the exclusion of agricultural laborers from the Wagner Act.³

As a result of a shift in the makeup of agricultural laborers, the agricultural sector was permanently separated from other sectors and any chance of uniting them was lost. Without the support of Congress and lacking an alliance with the strong industrial unions, future attempts at organizing to promote the betterment of agricultural laborers proved futile.⁴ And given the deterioration of working conditions, many of the rural laborers sought better paying urban jobs. To fill this labor void, growers in the Midwest began recruiting unorganized migrant laborers whose conditions at home were so poor that they were more inclined to tolerate insufferable conditions and meager wages.⁵

Migrant workers in Wisconsin suffered such wretched conditions that newspapers of this period provide numerous examples of these workers being referred to as slave laborers. In 1964, a leader of a Catholic group involved in political disputes regarding the use of migrant labor was quoted as saying that “growers are determined to continue to demand and get the equivalent of slave labor.”⁶ During a 1967 visit to Wisconsin to assist in the migrant labor movement, Cesar Chávez, leader of the farm labor movement in California, exclaimed that perhaps it would be better for the country to get out of agribusiness “if agriculture is so sick that they have to depend on slave labor.”⁷ In August 1971, Salvador Sánchez, an organizer in the Wisconsin migrant labor movement, led a group of marchers from Milwaukee to Madison to bring attention to the poor wages and living conditions that these families suffered. Sánchez argued that the government was refusing to enforce the laws put in place to protect the workers, and thus he asserted that “the State has not done away with this slavery.”⁸ These references to slavery are hard to justify when compared with the chattel slavery system well known in the Americas. Nonetheless, the fact that these leaders chose to use the word *slavery* to describe these workers illustrates how poor their conditions were.

The discourse that follows illustrates the conditions of Wisconsin’s migrant workers during the mid-twentieth century. The deplorable conditions that they endured were the direct result of the exclusionary policies of the New Deal. Denied the right to organize, agricultural laborers were at the mercy of the growers and the food processing corporations.

In addition, it is impossible to examine the plight of these workers and not recognize that their ethnicity played a major role in the mistreatment they suffered. Government reports from 1950, 1962, 1964, and 1968 each identify 75 percent or more of the migrant workers in the state not as immigrants, but rather as U.S. citizens from Texas who were of Mexican descent. They were sometimes referred to as Texas Mexicans and are hereafter referred to as “tejanos.”⁹ The ethnic implications make this

research more significant given the lack of research about Wisconsin's Hispanic history and heritage. With an ever-increasing Hispanic population in the state, it is important to recognize their place in the state's history and the challenges they have faced.¹⁰

The Truquero System and the Dangers of Migration

The hardships the tejano migrant workers endured began the moment they left Texas. In the 1950s and for decades to follow, the primary system used to hire migrant workers was known as the "Truquero System." The truquero was the crew leader, but *truquero* is also the Spanish word for an owner or operator of a truck.¹¹ Under this system, the workers registered with employment agencies in Texas. Growers registered through the Wisconsin State Employment Agency and contracted a truquero through a sister agency in Texas. The workers were entirely dependent upon the truquero. He was responsible for transporting and overseeing the migrant workers during their employment in Wisconsin. How the truqueros were paid may have varied, but typically each worker would pay the truquero a flat fee of a few dollars for their service in addition to transportation costs, estimated between \$9 and \$15 with reduced rates for children. Upon arrival the truquero could also be paid by the grower through a commission and various fees that came out of the workers' wages. If workers could not afford these initial costs, it was often paid by the agency as credit, and the workers would have to use their initial earnings after they had begun work to repay the debt.¹²

The amount the truquero was paid depended on the number of workers he was able to recruit. Often, this system led to many abuses by the truqueros including the endangerment of the workers. Because the commissions and fees were based on the number of workers, the truquero tended to cram as many workers and their families into his truck as possible. Herded into trucks like cattle, these workers then traveled approximately a thousand miles.¹³ As if being packed into these trucks with little room to move was not uncomfortable enough, the truquero rarely made stops en route. Stopping would have put his income at risk if any of the workers decided to leave.¹⁴

Discomfort was the least of the problems faced by migrant workers while traveling across the United States, as shown in several newspaper accounts. On June 6, 1957, a truck carrying 41 workers near Fayetteville, North Carolina, was involved in a crash with a semitruck. The workers, huddled on a flatbed trailer, had little protection; a photograph that accompanied the article showed bodies strewn about the roadway. Twenty-one people died in the accident, including the driver of the truck hauling the migrant workers. A follow-up story reported that the truck was in poor condition and that the vehicle was overloaded by approximately 2,500 pounds. Survivors said that the driver continuously traveled at high speeds and did not slow down for the intersection in which the accident took place. But accident investigators were unable to determine whether there was a mechanical malfunction or if the accident was caused simply by the driver's dangerous operation of the vehicle.¹⁵ Less than a week after the aforementioned incident, a truck transporting 18 migrant workers, including women and children, collided with a train near Vroman, Colorado. Twelve died in the Colorado accident, including the driver of the truck. Jack Lee, who witnessed the result of the collision, reported that "bodies, arms, legs and heads were strewn for a distance of 380 feet along the railroad right-of-way."¹⁶

Accidents like these, as well as the general traveling conditions, likely prompted the regulations put in place by the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1956. The regulations required that drivers be capable, that vehicles meet minimum safety standards, and also required periodic stops for meals and basic needs.¹⁷ However, in the absence of proper enforcement, workers enjoyed little protection and examples of accidents like the ones previously mentioned are still found after regulations were put

in place. In fact, only two years later, 15 migrant workers in Phoenix, Arizona, died after the truck they were being transported in hit a tree and became engulfed in flames. The impact was not what killed these workers; rather, it was the subsequent fire that quickly took over the vehicle that resulted in their deaths. The workers became trapped when a water tank, which was also being carried in the enclosed truck bed, dislodged and blocked their only exit. Eventually some were able to get out, but for many it was already too late.¹⁸ A related story in the same newspaper blamed regulations for the workers' deaths. The report asserted that regulations requiring that the transport vehicles offer shelter from the elements led to the use of converted bus trucks instead of the traditionally used flatbed trucks and that, in this case, the enclosure resulted in the workers being burned alive.¹⁹ The fact that these workers were willing to face the inherent dangers and discomforts of being crammed into trucks with dozens of other workers for such a long trip is telling of their economic hardship. Only someone with very little choice would be willing to subject himself and his family to such conditions.

In most cases, however, the workers arrived at their destinations physically unscathed, but they continued to be at the whim of their *truquero*. They had very little power over their own labor and could not choose where to work, the type of job they were to perform, or seek out higher wages. They also could not seek out employers with better housing arrangements. In an effort to bypass their dependency on the *truquero*, some workers tried to acquire their own vehicles and work directly with agricultural employers.

Many workers, however, were hesitant to go this route, primarily because the *truquero*, with all his faults, spoke Spanish. In dealing directly with the employer, laborers faced a significant language barrier.²⁰ In addition, a study in a 1950 report to the governor regarding the education levels and literacy rates of adult migrant workers suggests that many of these workers were highly uneducated and, therefore, were more easily taken advantage of than one might assume. The study showed that approximately 42 percent of the 184 workers included in the study had received no education at all, and only 14 percent of them had completed more than four years of schooling.²¹ Keeping this in mind, it is easy to see how the worker might have felt the need to put his trust in a *truquero* to ensure that he found work, shelter, and food for his family, rather than simply striking out on his own.

Working Conditions and Payment for Labor

Over-recruitment, which benefitted growers, was a perpetual problem. Given that there were many workers and only so much work to go around, the principles of supply and demand kept wages at a minimum. Employers defended over-recruitment on the basis that their world was one of uncertainty. Essentially, they could never be absolutely sure how much local labor they would be able to obtain, how many of the workers recruited from out of state would actually arrive for the season, and, most of all, how successful the crop season would be.²² Officials' hands seemed tied given that under-recruitment and an inability to properly harvest crops could have had devastating results for the employers as well as for the state's economy.²³

Indubitably, some of the employers' arguments were valid. But over-recruitment had devastating effects and thus one can argue that a greater effort should have been made to provide better estimates of need. After traveling such great distances, families arrived hungry and with little (if any) cash. Very likely, they were already in debt to their employment agency or *truquero*. And with limited job skills, migrant workers were forced to accept the first source of employment offered, regardless of wages, work, or living conditions.²⁴

Perhaps the single most important variable in migrant workers' lives was the work they did and the wages they received as a result of their labor. The work itself was primarily what was called "stoop labor," which means the migrant families spent their day, from dusk until dawn, assuming they were blessed with good weather, slouched over in the fields, hand-picking crops.²⁵ The work performed by these migrant laborers was physically taxing and the hours they worked were extremely long. Conditions varied from job to job, as evidenced in the 1960 Post-Season Farm Labor Report published by the Wisconsin State Employment Service. Included in this report are three addenda that outline the job expectations and conditions for cherry pickers, pickle pickers, and pea pitchers. These official job descriptions are telling of the labor intensiveness of the work being done and the long hours these workers were expected to keep.²⁶

Cherry pickers were required to use heavy ladders to pick rows of cherry trees from the top down. They were paid a piece rate, and part of the pay per pail of cherries was held until the four-to-five-week season had ended. This practice was to ensure that the workers stayed until the work was done. According to the *1960 Post-Season Report*, they were required to work at least eight hours a day, Monday through Saturday. The pickle picker was also required to work at least eight hours per day but without Sundays off, and their designated fields had to be completely picked every few days. Thus they were required to work however many hours were necessary per day to meet this expectation. The job detail mentions that the employers of pickle pickers preferred to hire families and explains that "the workers must be able to stoop, bend, and crawl along rows for extended periods of time."²⁷ The workers were also paid at a piece rate, generally 50 percent of what the grower received for the cucumbers from the processing plant. They were provided with housing but were required to arrange for their own meals.²⁸ Pea pitchers worked in the fields pitching pea vines from the ground to the machines that separated the peas. The work was described as being fast-paced and the workers were expected to work every day of the week, typically from five in the morning until as late as eleven thirty at night. Workers were paid per hour, with meals provided by the employer and the cost being taken out of their wages.²⁹

In 1967, Jesús Salas led a march from Wautoma to Madison to bring light to the suffering of migrant workers. He provided insight into the demeaning nature of the work and its dangers. He explained that the work in the fields, whether by hand or with the use of rudimentary tools, was "punishing both mentally and physically" and offered "no protection from dangerous herbicides and pesticides used on crops."³⁰ Salvador Sánchez, who participated in the 1967 march and led a similar march from Milwaukee to Madison in 1971, explained that the "animals in the stable would have better conditions than the humans in the fields."³¹ However, the workers had little choice because the harvest season was only so long and they needed to earn as much as possible as quickly as possible.

The actual payment the workers received for their labors is difficult to determine. During this period, minimum wage laws and regulations only covered women and minors and varied widely between the 1950s and the 1970s.³² For example, the required living wage for an agricultural worker in 1950 was \$0.38 per hour.³³ By 1960 this minimum wage increased to \$0.75 per hour.³⁴ However, as University of Wisconsin economics professor Elizabeth Brandeis Raushenbush pointed out, the fact that the minimum wage existed did not necessarily mean that the workers were actually being paid this wage, which was already the lowest wage of any industry in the state. She asserted that in 1962 the average daily wage for the worker was likely less than \$6.00, which was not enough to meet the \$0.75 per hour minimum.³⁵ In 1963 the minimum wage increased to \$0.85 per hour and to \$1.00 in 1964.³⁶ A new increase in

1968 set it at \$1.30.³⁷ The fact that minimum wages were raised suggests a concern for the workers, but without proper protections or means to enforce these minimums, it is unlikely that the majority of workers ever received minimum wages.

At most times during this period there also existed minimum piece rates, which allowed the employer to pay the worker based not on hours worked, but rather on the amount of produce picked. The piece rates were set specific to the item being picked—for example, for many years cherries earned the picker \$0.20 per pail.³⁸ In addition, minimum piece rates did not exist for every item. Workers were not guaranteed minimums on items for which no piece rate was officially set. Finally, it was up to the employer to choose to pay the minimum rate per hour to the women and minors as covered under the aforementioned minimum wage laws, or to pay the workers at a piece rate which the growers set themselves. The widespread confusion created by a complicated system and the various piece rates for each item kept wages low as it was difficult to properly enforce minimums that were set.

It was in the grower's best interest to pay a piece rate, particularly when a minimum did not exist. In fact, most often the piece rate was used, and if a minimum piece rate existed for this particular product, only the women and minors were covered under the minimum rates. This is an important differentiation, because if the entire family worked together in the fields, women and children included, they often filled their pails or baskets together and turned them in for their pay together. The employer could then argue that he had no way of determining what portion of the work was done by the women or the children and simply pay them as a family unit, making it nearly impossible to ensure that the women and children were being paid enough to reach the minimum rate.³⁹

In 1964, Raushenbush carried out a field study regarding the wages paid to migrant workers picking cucumbers in Waushara County. The results of her study were included in the *1966 and 1967 Report to the Governor*, which Raushenbush wrote in her capacity as chairman of the Committee on Migratory Labor. At this point cucumbers were not covered under a specific piece rate. The study examined the earnings of 330 migrant families for a total of 1,358 workers. It showed that the workers averaged less than \$4.00 per day, \$20.00 per week, and \$117.00 per season.⁴⁰ In consideration of these figures, *if* the worker made \$4.00 and worked only eight hours that day, he or she made only \$0.50 per hour that day. However, an eight-hour day during the harvest season is not likely. Thus, for every hour over eight, the actual wage per hour made by the worker continued to decrease. Because workers usually worked from dusk until dawn, assuming a 12-hour day would put the wage per hour earned at \$0.33.

These figures seem to match those described by Sánchez in a 1971 interview about the march to Madison. In this interview he told the reporter that a week before, “a family of eight migrants worked 70 hours for \$19, or approximately 30 cents an hour.”⁴¹ Examples like these, both from an expert's study and the family described by Sánchez, show clear evidence that the employers were ignoring minimum wage laws and effectively getting away with it. A worker explained that the pay received only afforded them enough funds to feed their families for the week. He said, “You would get enough to buy some rice and beans, and if you're lucky a pound of meat for the week.”⁴² Trapped in a cycle of poverty, families earned only enough to sustain themselves. And their inability to save money further prolonged their dependence on truqueros and growers.

In addition to salaries that could hardly be described as living wages, other factors such as weather and poor crop growth could decimate the workers' earnings. The workers had to be present to work, but just being there did not entitle them to be paid.

If bad weather prevented them from being in the fields, they went without pay. If the employer requested them to arrive before the crops were ready to be picked, they remained without pay. This was also the case when the crops failed.⁴³ An incident reported in the *Monroe Evening Times* in 1954 illustrated the tejanos' ordeal. The article tells of a group of 23 migrant workers who had been working in cucumber fields in Outagamie County. As a result of a bad growing season, the workers' employer had not paid them. After learning of their plight, the sheriff sent a bus to collect the workers and offered them shelter in the county jail in Appleton. Hungry and with nowhere to go, these honest men had no other choice but to spend the night in prison.⁴⁴

Child Labor and Education

Raushenbush explains that the stoop-labor nature of the work actually became an argument in defense of the use of child labor. The migrant children often accompanied their families in the fields and desperate circumstances forced the migrant families to accept the assistance of their children. Their small size and proximity to the ground made the work less physically straining on the children.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, agricultural work was not included in various child labor laws that existed during this period. The only legislation that restricted child labor in agriculture was related to mandatory schooling for children under the age of 16. These regulations stated that during the school year a child could not be working during school hours. But keeping the children from working in the fields during school hours proved difficult to enforce. Adults working in the fields needed to bring their children with them to watch over them. If by chance anyone with the authority to enforce such regulations, such as truancy officers, happened by, the employer or the workers themselves could easily claim that the children were only playing and not working, making enforcement nearly impossible.⁴⁶

In addition, the authorities would have had no way of determining the true age of a child found working in a field, and laws at the time did not require work permits for children working in agriculture. Even if they were able to somehow determine the age, the employer was protected by regulation: as long as the employer did not knowingly hire a child and as long as he explained the rules regarding child labor to the family, he could not be held accountable for any infractions.⁴⁷ A lack of strict regulation in regards to child labor in agriculture likely stemmed from a desire to prevent regulations from interfering with the running of a family farm. Lack of regulation is understandable when viewed in this light. However, the work being done by the children of migrant families *required* strict regulation to prevent the exploitation of children—this fact was known and apparently ignored. Raushenbush pointed out the backwardness of the lack of regulation of migrant child labor and stated that the then-current protections were more “like the original child labor law of 1877 than like the mature body of child labor regulations which apply to other occupations.”⁴⁸ The fact that children were allowed to be exploited in this way in such modern times is deplorable. Furthermore, the complacency necessary to allow these children to spend their days toiling in the fields rather than playing or sitting at desks in classrooms like their white counterparts furthers the argument that these families, and not necessarily just the hired workers, were viewed and treated as second-class citizens.

Many government reports indicated deep concern for migrant children and their lack of education. However, finding a solution met nearly insurmountable difficulties. Migration was entirely dependent upon the growing seasons. Families began moving north before the school year at home would end, and they usually returned home only after the school year had started again. A newspaper article from 1949 described the problem and stated that “if the child goes to school at all, he’ll attend five or six different schools in a year. He’ll spend two to six weeks in one school, then have

to transfer when it comes time to move on to the next harvest center.”⁴⁹ The article explained that after a few years of this type of intermittent education, the children fell farther and farther behind other pupils of their age. Many eventually stopped attending school altogether.⁵⁰

With respect to children’s education, the employers may not have been as negligent as in other areas, like wages and housing. Raushenbush reported that some even worked hard to get the migrant children into the schools in their district. But assuming that the law did not apply to migrant children because they were not permanent residents, many districts turned these students away.⁵¹ While some officers might have been ignorant of the law, others may have been attempting to avoid the difficulties inherent in teaching children who spoke little or no English. Or perhaps they believed that Wisconsin tax dollars should not be used to educate migrant children. The fact is that under state law the children *were* required to attend school in Wisconsin, whether residents or not, but again, this was nearly impossible to enforce. The aforementioned newspaper article in 1949 asserted that “states and local authorities are often lax about enforcing compulsory school attendance. Truant [sic] officers rarely visit migratory workers camps.”⁵² Families were continually on the move and those in charge of enforcing mandatory schooling laws had no idea where these children were or who they were and if they did they had no way of knowing their ages.⁵³ As a result, if the family, the employer, or the school districts did not know or did not care, migrant children easily slipped through the cracks and went without, or with very intermittent, education.

In 1950 the *Governor’s Commission on Human Rights* acknowledged that the traditional school year with a summer break was a problem for children who spent most of their time moving back and forth. Even if they had been forced to attend class when they arrived in the state, they would have only been present for a few weeks to a few months of the school year, and then again after the long summer break at the start of the next year. Moreover, tejano students were likely to switch schools multiple times during a school year. Migrant students, the report stated, needed a school program tailored to their needs.⁵⁴

There is some evidence that various regions made valiant attempts to deal with the issue of education for migrant children. In 1950 a summer school program began in Waupun and continued for a few years until the demand declined. A law passed in 1961 that provided federal funds for public school summer sessions resulted in sessions being created for migrant children in Manitowoc (1960–1961) and in Lake Mills (1962). The Lake Mills summer school was so well received that local families began to send their children as well, and it became the first summer school program to service both migrant children and local children.⁵⁵ In 1965 Congress passed an act that provided federal funds for the education of migrant children. In 1966 the Governor’s Commission reported that there was an overall increase in the number of migrant students enrolled in summer school and day-care programs throughout the state.⁵⁶ In 1967 there seemed to be even more improvement. The state estimated that in addition to the workers, approximately “3,500 non-working dependents” arrived in the state.⁵⁷ These included infants and children as well as elderly family members. Out of these, 2,054 children enrolled in some sort of summer school, which was viewed as a tremendous success and improvement over prior years.⁵⁸ That at least some progress was being made on this particular problem was crucial to the migrant workers, but these children were not receiving the same level of education afforded to children whose parents were not forced to live a nomadic lifestyle. For these children, nothing could trap them more in the migrant stream than being undereducated.

Housing

Another major indicator of the mistreatment and substandard conditions of the migrant workers was housing. Employers provided housing free of charge in either barracks or family units.⁵⁹ Many of the workers were housed in either barracks or dilapidated old farm buildings. During World War II, the War Emergency Program allowed workers to be brought from places like Mexico and Jamaica. The barracks where these workers lived in the 1940s were now reused by migrant workers. Meant to be temporary, these constructions were built quickly and shoddily and their condition worsened with time. Their walls and roofs were collapsing, windows had no screens or glass, and they lacked running water or working bathrooms. Often air circulation and lighting was poor. With little or no privacy, they were inadequate for families and overcrowding was a serious problem. With three to five families to a barrack, entire families shared one small room and slept on bunks or beds of straw.⁶⁰

Laws enacted in 1951, and expanded upon in 1957 and 1961, regulated migrant camp housing. But reports in 1962 showed very little improvement in housing. The laws required that any employer who hired six or more migrant workers must adhere to the standards set forth. The regulations set standards for the amount of space required per person, adequate ventilation, running water, bathrooms, and methods of disposing garbage. Despite these regulations many of the growers ignored the regulations.⁶¹ High overcrowding continued with large numbers of people crammed into deteriorated shanties. Running water, whether hot or cold, was also still a major issue.⁶² A newspaper article in 1974 described a migrant camp composed of old railroad boxcars filled with bunk beds used as housing.⁶³ One can only imagine how it would feel to return from working in the fields all day to a cramped bunk bed in an old boxcar. The article does not mention whether this particular camp was certified or not, but a related article does outline a minimum space per person portion of the codes that applied to migrant housing. It states that for adults, migrant housing was required to provide 60 square feet of space per person and 30 square feet per child under the age of 12.⁶⁴ A standard boxcar that was 40 feet long and just under 10 feet wide provided approximately 400 square feet of space.⁶⁵ By the criteria set for minimum space, a standard boxcar should have housed a maximum of six adults sleeping on three sets of bunk beds. These figures do not coincide with the report that the boxcars were filled with bunk beds and suggest that the camp referred to was not up to code. The minimum space requirements were by no means extraordinary and the fact that growers could not or would not meet reasonable minimums is deplorable.

The regulations also authorized inspectors to certify whether migrant camps met the state's requirements. Those determined as non-compliant could be closed. Others were issued a temporary permit until the employers brought them up to code. A report to the governor in 1968 summarizes the earlier years' inspection results and provides telling figures. In 1959, of 433 registered camps inspected, only 92 were certified with the remainder given conditional permits and instructions for required improvements. In 1960, 386 registered camps were inspected. Of those, 128 were certified, two were closed, and the rest were given conditional permits. In 1961, of 351 registered camps, 269 were certified and 22 were ordered to close. According to the report, these figures from 1961 continued to be the norm for most of the decade.⁶⁶ However, these figures only represent camps that registered with the state, and one can only guess how many camps existed without the state's knowledge and therefore were not inspected.

While the numbers indicate that there were responsible growers who were making honest attempts at meeting the state's minimum standards, they also indicate that others found creative ways to circumvent their responsibilities. Many growers simply ignored closing orders and continued to operate their camps; subsequent attempts to penalize

these growers were often futile.⁶⁷ In fact, the marches led by Jesús Salas and by Salvador Sánchez cited the poor conditions of the migrant camps as one of the primary reasons for their efforts. Salas provided further descriptions of the conditions including an instance of five family members sharing one bed. He also cited a disgraceful example from Wautoma, in which used mattresses were retrieved from the Wautoma city dump and resold to growers to be used by the migrant workers in the camps.⁶⁸ This example in particular is telling of the low esteem in which the tejano workers were held.

Sánchez stressed that the state was simply not doing enough to ensure that regulations were enforced. He also brought to the forefront the unfortunate misuse of a state anti-trespassing law. Growers were using this law to prevent inspectors and humanitarian groups from entering the camps to either examine conditions or inform the workers of their rights.⁶⁹ This is only one example of growers' attempts to avoid compliance; there were others that were far more complex. One such scheme involved the grower selling the land and the camp to the workers at the beginning of the season. Inevitably, the workers would fail to meet their payments by the end of the season, and the ownership of the land would return to the grower. The scheme was repeated season after season. Because workers held temporary ownership of their residences, growers avoided complying with migrant camp laws. Another scheme involved the grower selling the property to a third party who would then rent the land to the workers for housing during the season. Since the property was being rented voluntarily and not provided by the grower, it would not fall under the codes for migrant camps.⁷⁰ Thus, if the grower was determined he could circumvent all of the codes, and therefore the laws, regardless of any efforts to enforce them, would fail to offer protection to the workers. Evidence suggests that as late as 1976 extremely poor conditions continued to exist whether or not they were the norm.⁷¹

The question arises as to why the migrant workers would have been willing to live in such substandard shelters. An in-depth series of articles published in the *Stevens Point Daily Journal* on September 16, 1974, provides invaluable insight relevant to this question. According to these articles, tejanos feared the loss of their jobs if they chose to complain. To make matters worse, growers shared the names of the migrants who made any kind of demands.⁷² That the workers could be punished in this manner for simply trying to ensure a safe and habitable environment is proof that the system had placed all of the power in the hands of the growers.

What may be surprising is that migrants who were interviewed for the article also showed mixed feelings in regard to the state regulations. While there were certainly sentiments of gratitude for the improvements they had seen over the years, many stated that they were more concerned that the regulations would lead to camps being shut down. Essentially, they preferred to be able to work and simply put up with the poor housing conditions. In their minds, it was not ideal, but it was preferable to searching for other housing or work or, worst case scenario, returning to Texas without any income.⁷³ It appears that the regulations and attempts to improve the lot of migrant workers and their housing situation did actually prove to be detrimental at times. One interviewee cited a case where the camp was closed by inspectors and the workers were forced to immediately vacate the premises without any place to go. He accused the inspectors of preferring that the workers live in their vehicles.⁷⁴ Situations like these highlight the difficulties faced by the government in attempting to improve conditions and the impossible position of the workers themselves. First and foremost they needed to work to earn money to feed themselves and their families. Surely they wanted safe and adequate housing, but if they could not feed themselves housing would be of little concern. Therefore, when faced with a loss of their only source of income, which was a

possible result if they had stood up for themselves and demanded better conditions, one can understand why they accepted the substandard housing.

Hostility and Discrimination

Despite concerns regarding the plight of migrant workers, little effective action was taken to right the situation. This suggests that the general population thought very little of the tejanos. Raushenbush stated that the general thinking of both the growers and the taxpayers of Wisconsin was that in recruiting laborers from Texas they were bringing “just ‘hands’ to harvest or cultivate crops—not whole people.”⁷⁵ She suggested that people did not believe that Wisconsin’s money should go to care for these workers or their families, whether in housing, medical care, or education for the young, regardless of their necessity for the economy of the state.⁷⁶ These attitudes were reflected by Wisconsin residents’ treatment of these migrant workers. Rev. Ellis Marshburn surveyed migrant workers and reported that they suffered “mistreatment in retail stores, social rejection and general attitudes of unfriendliness” from the general public.⁷⁷

A 1974 newspaper article quoted a Wisconsin resident who said, “Those migrants are down applying for food stamps when they should be working. And then they drive those expensive cars.”⁷⁸ According to the article, similar assertions were common in communities with large migrant populations. Even though the reader of this statement is denied the opportunity to hear the speaker’s tone and read body language, the disdain coming out of the comment is palpable. It also shows the lack of understanding that permanent residents had regarding the conditions the migrant workers endured. As the article pointed out, and as previously mentioned in this essay, these laborers were often required to report to the job well before the crops were ready to be picked. The goal was to ensure that the workers were there the second these perishable food crops were ready. But they were not paid for their presence alone, and therefore food stamps were necessary to feed their families until they began working and earning income. Also, to the citizens of Wisconsin, seeing a migrant family in a nice car apparently led them to believe that the family was well-off, which was not a justifiable inference. If a migrant worker chose to break from the *truquero* system and transport himself and his family by his own means, a reliable car was a necessity.⁷⁹ As has happened so often throughout history and still occurs today, a lack of understanding or a view of a people as “different” bred resentment and hate.

As late as 1970, a newspaper article indicated that migrant workers continued to suffer discrimination. The article referred to a lawsuit filed by a migrant worker who was denied her request to open a savings account at a state bank. The worker told her attorney that she was refused the account either due to her status as a migrant worker or because of her Hispanic heritage. According to the bank’s president, it was company policy to deny savings accounts to migrant workers and instead, the bank would offer to provide a money order. As the article pointed out, a money order was not an equal replacement for a savings account, and lacked protection for the worker in the form of “insurance or security against theft for the worker’s money.”⁸⁰ The reason behind the bank policy of refusing savings accounts to migrant workers was not given, likely because there was not a justifiable reason.

The district attorney involved in the case thought that the actions of the bank broke the law but he did not believe that he could prove it in court. Consequently, the case was dropped even though it does seem plausible that the woman’s ethnicity played a role in the bank’s decision as well as its policy against providing equal services to all. The laws did not protect against discrimination based on a person’s type of employment and ethnic discrimination would have been hard to prove.

Many of the reports by governmental committees that examined the status of migrant workers point to a program that was started in the fall of 1949 in the city of Waupun to help make the communities more open and accessible to the migrant workers and their families. Initiated in the same city where one of the earliest summer school programs for migrant children was created, it was touted as “a demonstration ground for cooperation on the state level.”⁸¹ The program brought together community leaders and created a committee with a goal to improve migrant relations by the following summer. It was repeatedly described as a success that would be copied in other communities going forward. None of the reports, however, state why Waupun was chosen for such a pilot program. But newspaper articles from the summer of 1949 provide a plausible and shameful reason for the city being chosen. That summer, a park custodian banned migrant children from using the county park, including the swimming pool, the dance hall, and a food stand that was owned by the same park custodian.⁸² The park custodian, in defense of his actions, proclaimed that he made the decision to ban the children because “white parents don’t want their children to play with Mexicans.” He also claimed that the children were “ruining his pop stand business.”⁸³ The incident sparked so much controversy that its newspaper coverage caught the attention of the Mexican government. Startled by the implications of deeply seeded discrimination against Mexicans as a result of this incident of segregation, Mexican officials ordered an investigation to analyze the anti-Mexican sentiment in Wisconsin.⁸⁴ While one would hope that this was an isolated incident, it suggests that an underlying hostility toward the migrant families existed and was based on their ethnicity.

Conclusion

Perhaps the hostility and disdain for the *tejanos* provides an explanation for why so little was accomplished to improve the conditions they suffered. No doubt it is an incredibly shameful reason, but so were the conditions these workers were expected to accept. Salas stated that even the movements led by the workers and former migrant workers like himself and Sánchez resulted in few tangible benefits. However, he also stated that through these marches and demonstrations the workers “won the affirmation of their dignity.”⁸⁵

Simply put, the *tejano* migrant workers were denied the freedom to choose their own employment and to seek opportunity. They were denied fair wages as protected by law and thus the opportunity to improve their lives and that of their families. Their children were denied an education that was lawfully owed to them and thus they also lost all hope of exiting the migrant stream. They were denied housing and living conditions that were expected for any other segment of the population. They worked hard, long hours and bolstered the economy of the state. They made it possible for the entire country to enjoy affordable food, at their own expense. For this, they suffered discrimination in their communities because of their language difference, their skin color, and their often misunderstood mobile lifestyle. They were treated as subhuman and inferior.

If agricultural laborers had not been excluded from the provisions of the Wagner Act, the agricultural sector may have experienced the same gains as other sectors of the economy. Throughout the following decades after its passage, organized labor efforts would have created a strong power base to avoid the severe decline of these laborers’ standard of living. And if the changes in the makeup of the agricultural laborers had occurred gradually, the story of the *tejanos* may have been quite different. While the New Deal era may have been uplifting for a great number of people and worthy of the glory it is ascribed, it is also forever stained by the failure to apply these social programs equally.

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Notes

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