

CLAG Field Study Report

The CLAG field study award crucially and generously provided me a period of time in the archives of Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. This primary-source research will contribute crucial historical background to my ongoing ethnographic research about migration.

One of the collections with which I have spent the most time is that of the Mexican Embassy in the United States. This vast collection is important for understanding current relationships between Mexico and the United States, and is important for my project for understanding the history of how the two countries resolve conflicts over the treatment of immigrants. Traveling through the documents is striking for the way that the relative geopolitical status of the two countries becomes clear again and again: from cattle disease to water shortage to workers' compensation, the Mexican embassy struggles to challenge US authority, no matter how reasonable their request, or how extreme the United States' violation of agreements or rights.

The case study that has proved most interesting to me, equally for the geography it spans (the US plains states), its duration (from the early twentieth century through the Bracero Program), and the way it exemplifies the complexities of the US' incorporation of immigrant workers into its economy. Three moments from documents contained in the *Archivo de la Embajada de México en Estados Unidos* exemplify this complexity:

In December of 1911, two hundred Mexicans were cast onto the streets of Lamar, Colorado, an eastern plains town that at the time had less than 3,000 residents. They had

been hired by a contractor, also a Mexican, to work in the region's sugar beet fields, which fed the American Beet Sugar factory in Rocky Ford, Colorado. The contractor was responsible for collecting the workers' wages from the owners of the beet farms, and for paying both the workers and the local shopkeepers who had been providing provisions for the workers and their families. When the contractor died suddenly, there was no authority to ensure the payment of the workers on time. The county judge appointed an administrator to rectify the situation, but that local administrator stated "*absolutamente imposible* (physical impossibility) *pagarles tan pronto como los mexicanos querían que se les pagara.*" The workers were left to live on the streets, without money even for groceries. They wrote to the consul in Denver asking for help, and when they received no reply, they wrote directly to the embassy in Washington.

A month later, no help had come, and town officials were getting angry. They wrote to the consulate at Denver:

We have already supplied them with groceries and clothing to the amount of from \$200 to \$300 at the County's expense and feel that we have done more for them than we are called upon to do and will say that it is high time for the Mexican government to take some action and look after its subjects.

There are two interconnected striking aspects of this event to me: first, the complexity of the pyramid of contractors, as early as 1911, made it very difficult to understand who ought to assume the responsibility for paying the Mexican workers. By contracting to farmers, the American Beet Sugar company relieved itself of any responsibility—the company is named only in communications by the workers, not by government or consular officials; by working through a labor contractor, the farmers also absolved themselves of responsibility for their workers' well-being. Secondly, the quickness and ease with which the Prowers County clerk blames the Mexican government for not caring

for its citizens reflects the seed of a pattern of externalization of responsibility that continues and grows to today.

Fast forward to the Bracero Program, which during its duration from 1942 to 1964 provided a vast proportion of the sugar beet labor necessary in the Rocky Mountain and Plains region. In the Mexican embassy's archive of that program, we see that the same manipulation of the levels of contracting- and sub-contracting to absolve beet companies of a responsibility to pay their workers—as well as a new recourse to the binational agreement. Starting in 1948, the Mexican consuls at Salt Lake City and Portland are inundated with complaints of violations of all kinds by the Amalgamated Sugar Company, an Ogden, Utah-based firm whose farms and factories spanned into Oregon and Idaho. The conflicts began in June 1948, when the company deported a group of workers from a farm in Twin Falls, Idaho, telling them that it was per the orders of the Mexican Consulate. The workers had begun a strike due to the fact that they were making \$1.50 per day, but being deducted \$1.80 for room and board. They argued, as did the consulate and embassy, that this violated the minimum wage set forth in the contract. What ensued is a year (plus!)-long debate turning on whether piecework can be understood to qualify for the minimum wage of the contract; whether the American company can demand that the worker (or the Mexican government) pay his return passage if the company decides they are incompetent, when the contract states that it is the responsibility of the company; and whether the workers have the right to curtail their contracts. While this is a right set forth in the contract's articles 7 and 8, as the Mexican Consulate reminds both directors of the Amalgamated Sugar Company and the United States Employment Service again and again, the Amalgamated Sugar Company continues

to refuse, and the employment service declines to enforce the contract, stating a need for further interpretation of the clause.

The sugar beet industry provides a case study for the way that Mexican immigrants in the United States are not only a case of “imported colonialism,” but one whose bureaucratic and enforcement mechanisms change and gain complexity over time. It also highlights immigration and its enforcement as a site in which interpretation and enforcement, rather than major changes to laws, are determinant. In my ethnographic fieldwork, my interlocutors speak frequently of the current situation of migration toward the United States and return/deportation to Mexico using ideas about levels of citizenship, the right to have a family, and the authority of the Mexican government to take care of Mexicans living in the United States. These facets of the relationship between the two countries, and the way that state power—and disempowerment—act upon individuals, are crucial to understand in their historical context. While we might say that the historical concerns are surprisingly current, I argue that the converse also holds: that our current challenges, however novel their horrors may seem, are surprisingly historical.