

YA ESTAMOS HARTOS: THE STRUGGLE FOR MEXICAN AMERICAN LABOR  
AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN CALIFORNIA DURING THE NEW DEAL ERA

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with  
Honors in History

Acadia University

April, 2015

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This thesis by Regan Adele Zscheile  
is accepted in its present form by the  
Department of History and Classics  
as satisfying the thesis requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

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## **Acknowledgements**

To Mom and Dad: you have never failed to support me throughout the years. Thank you for your enthusiasm and words of encouragement throughout this entire process. I would not be where I am today without the both of you. I am forever in your debt.

To my thesis advisor, Dr. Dennis: without your guidance and advice this thesis could not have been completed.

To my second reader, Dr. Duke: first, thank you for taking the time to be a part of this process and second, thank you for making a three hour 8:30 seminar so entertaining.

To the professors of the Acadia History Department: thank you for the times that you dropped into my office. Your wit and intelligence has, and always will, inspire me.

To my friends, both at Acadia and elsewhere: thank you for the support you have shown me throughout the years and throughout this process. With you guys, I can do anything.

To my fellow honors students: I am so grateful to have had you beautiful people by my side this year. Congratulations to all of you.

“La vida es como un arca inmensa llena de posibilidades.” – Amado Nervo

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the experience of Mexican migrant labor within California during the late 1920s as well as throughout the 1930s. Previously, historians have acknowledged as well as explored the destitution facing the Mexican working class during this time. Moreover, attention has been given to the importance of Mexican American grassroots activism in the efforts to achieve Mexican labor rights as well as civil rights within the United States. However, this thesis takes such explorations further and analyzes how middle class intellectuals, in addition to Mexican grassroots activism, contributed to and intensified the fight to achieve Mexican American rights. Ultimately, this thesis suggests that Mexican grassroots activism combined with the efforts of middle class intellectuals – i.e. Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, and Dorothea Lange – enabled the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee to be an effective force for social change in California. This committee not only remains scarce within historiography in general, but its contributions to Mexican American labor upheavals are especially overlooked. Yet, the La Follette Committee must be studied in this context. For the first time, the rights of Mexican Americans were seriously considered within the United States government. Moreover, the Committee offered a genuine alternative to the tradition of Anglo intolerance towards Mexican Americans that had been embedded in American society since its acquisition of the West. The significance of this is unprecedented and will be explored throughout this thesis.



## Chapter One: Historical Background and Historiography

### *Military Conquest*

The primary focus of this thesis will be the experience of Mexican migratory labor throughout the late 1920s as well as the 1930s; more specifically the experience within California. However, a responsible account of any specific Mexican American experience must begin with an analysis of how Mexicans were initially integrated into the United States. This integration was largely through military conquest that was motivated by both an imperialistic agenda as well as feelings of racial superiority. Thus, the origins of the Mexican American migratory experience in the late 1920s and the 1930s lie in the political and socioeconomic process of colonialism by which Mexican peoples were conquered and subordinated by a greater military power. Consequently, what developed and would continue to prevail in the United States was a sense of both cultural and racial Anglo superiority.

As stated by historians Leonardo F. Estrada, F. Chris Garcia, Reynaldo Flores Macias, and Lionel Maldonado, the period that brought Mexico's northern reaches under control of the U.S. begins approximately in 1836 with the end of the Texas Revolt and concludes in 1853 with the Gadsden Purchase.<sup>1</sup> The origins of the conquest can be understood first by understanding Anglo immigration into northern Mexico prior to the conquest; and second by understanding the contentious political situation that consumed the U.S. during this period.

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<sup>1</sup> Leobardo F. Estrada, F. Chris García, Reynaldo Flores Macías, and Lionel Maldonado. "Chicanos in the United States: A History of Exploitation and Resistance." *Dadalus* Vol. 110, No. 2 (Spring 1981): 103. Accessed October 27, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024726>.

Mexico, which began its struggle for independence from Spain in 1810, recognized the advantage of increasing the population loyal to its cause. Thus, it granted permission to foreigners in 1819 to immigrate into its northern area, what is now Texas. Approximately twenty thousand Anglos, primarily Southern slaveholders in search of land apt for agricultural exploitation, would settle in Texas by 1830. Those settling in Mexican territories were required to abide by certain conditions: pledge their allegiance to the Mexican government and adopt Catholicism. However, actual enforcement of these conditions was difficult for two reasons: the distance of Anglo settlements from Mexico City and Anglo notions of superiority.<sup>2</sup> Historian Eugene C. Barker writes that,

By 1835 the Texans saw themselves in danger of becoming the alien subjects of a people to whom they deliberately believed themselves morally, intellectually, and politically superior. Such racial feelings underlay Texan-American relations from the establishment of the very first Anglo-American colony in 1821.<sup>3</sup>

Distaste of the conditions agreed-upon for settlement and feelings of racial supremacy ultimately led Anglo immigrants to press for independence from Mexico. These tensions culminated with the Texas Revolt of 1835-36, which created for Anglo-Texans the so-called independent Texas Republic. Although the Mexican government never recognized this republic, Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado contend that it “provided the pretext for further U.S. territorial expansion and set the stage for the war between Mexico and the United States.”<sup>4</sup>

Why the United States desired territorial expansion into Mexico has much to do with the contentious political situation in which the U.S. found itself. Northern abolitionists argued that Southern politicians sought this war in order to expand slavery

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<sup>2</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 104.

<sup>3</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 104.

<sup>4</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 104.

and shift the congressional power balance indefinitely in their favor. Thus, the creation of the Texas Republic presented the perfect opportunity for U.S. politicians to take advantage of a weakened nation torn by divisive internal disputes and acquire a territory inhabited by a willing population who no longer viewed themselves as Mexican. The United States annexed Texas in 1845 with the intention of not only securing this territory, but of provoking further conflict in order to gain additional lands in the west.<sup>5</sup> The strategy was rewarded when Mexico, which still viewed Texas as rightfully Mexican territory, declared war on May 13, 1846.

Overwhelming evidence suggests that colonialist racism dictated this episode of U.S. expansion. For example, one participant of the Santa Fe expedition – which was initiated by the Republic of Texas in order to secure territory in parts of Northern Mexico – declared, “There are no people on the continent of America, whether civilized or uncivilized, with one or two exceptions, more miserable in condition or despicable in morals than the mongrel race inhabiting New Mexico.” Similarly, in June 1846, the *Illinois State Register* stated, “The Mexicans are reptiles in the path of progressive democracy – who with his big boots on, is bound to travel from Portland to Patagonia and they must either crawl or be crushed.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, not only did Anglos view themselves as superior beings, they truly believed that if they did not conquer Mexican land and flaunt their superiority, Mexicans would infiltrate the U.S. as well as infect it with their “despicable morals”.

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas De Genova. “Race, Space, and the Reinvention of Latin America in Mexican Chicago.” *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 25, No. 5 (September 1998): 92. Accessed October 27, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2634090>.

<sup>6</sup> De Genova. “Race, Space, and the Reinvention of Latin America in Mexican Chicago,” 92.

The U.S. emerged victorious from the Mexican-American War which ended in 1848. It secured for the United States territory that would become the American Southwest. This included Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, and Utah as well as portions of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. However, this was not the end of U.S. expansion into Mexico. Through the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, the United States acquired approximately 45,000 additional square miles in present day Arizona and New Mexico. The United States, which wished to construct a rail line through California, sent James Gadsden to Mexico in 1853 to negotiate the acquisition of necessary Mexican territory. Mexico, which desperately needed funds to rebuild its economy after the war, agreed to sell this land.<sup>7</sup>

Following the conquest, a new border was drawn along the Rio Bravo and Rio Grande and approximately 80,000 Mexicans became U.S. citizens. Territories and populations that had not previously been separated subsequently became divided. As historian Nicholas De Genova points out, the premise of Chicano studies is not incorrect when it states, “we didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Mexican integration into the United States was defined by conquest and warfare and was motivated by imperialistic visions as well as notions of racial supremacy. Thus, the Mexican experience within the United States – and, in particular, within the Southwest – was initially defined by oppression as well as exploitation. This experience not only continued post-conquest, but intensified.

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<sup>7</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 104-105.

<sup>8</sup> De Genova. “Race, Space, and the Reinvention of Latin America in Mexican Chicago,” 88.

### *Post-Conquest until 1930*

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo concluded Mexican and U.S. military conflict and was signed February 2, 1848. Mexicans who occupied ceded lands were given the option to relocate south of the new border within a year or accept U.S. sovereignty. However, many opted to stay as the treaty explicitly guaranteed to them certain inalienable rights. For instance, it guaranteed to those who stayed “all the rights of citizens of the [United States], according to the principles of the Constitution.” These included voting rights as well as the right to hold public office, own land, and testify in court. Furthermore, they would be “maintained and protected in the free enjoyment of their religion without restriction.”<sup>9</sup>

However, American business elites and government officials soon violated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexicans were reduced to the status of a colonized group and were displaced socially, politically, and economically. Anglo authority, as proven above to exude attitudes of racial supremacy, considered the violation of the treaty to be perfectly justifiable. By the 1900s, Mexicans – still largely concentrated in the Southwestern U.S. – had been largely dispossessed of their property and relegated to a lower-class status. Due to the presence of U.S. troops as well as both governmental and judicial bias, Anglos replaced Mexicans in positions of power in economic structures. Many Anglos viewed Mexicans as a natural resource of the region that could be easily domesticated as well as exploited. Thus, the majority of Mexicans became landless laborers who were politically, socially, and economically powerless.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 104-105.

<sup>10</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 106-107.

Prior to 1900, Mexicans also found themselves subjected to severe racial violence. Mexican murders and lynchings were not only common, but often went unreported. For example, in 1851, the first lynching in California took place. The victim was Juanita, a Mexican woman who was three months pregnant. She had been raped by a drunken Anglo aggressor who, by the law, went unpunished. Her Mexican lover/husband eventually killed the Anglo and was exiled; she was lynched.<sup>11</sup> Race based violence towards Mexicans increased at the turn of the century. It has been estimated that in the period between 1891 and 1930 there were 166 lynching victims of Mexican descent in the Southwest.<sup>12</sup> In 1922, the *New York Times* attested to the violent victimization of Mexicans stating,

It may seem too extravagant to say that there is an open season for shooting Mexicans...but the rude jest finds expression among a certain class in the American communities. The killing of Mexicans without provocation is so common as to pass almost unnoticed.<sup>13</sup>

The intensification of racial violence towards Mexicans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was related to the increasing recognition that there existed a clear boundary between what was to be considered white and what was to be considered a minority within the United States. For example, the distinction between Mexican and white was both studied and justified on a scientific level by race scientists who advocated Mexican otherness. For instance, Lothrop Stoddard, a prominent eugenicist at this time, postulated that:

Taken as a whole, 'Latin America', the vast land-block from the Rio Grande to Cape Horn, is racially not 'Latin' but Amerindian or negroid...though commonly considered part of the white world, most of

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<sup>11</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, "Chicanos in the United States," 107.

<sup>12</sup> Cybelle Fox, and Thomas A. Guglielmo. "Defining America's Racial Boundaries: Blacks, Mexicans, and European Immigrants, 1890-1945." *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 118, No. 2 (September 2012): 363. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1086/666383.

<sup>13</sup> Fox and Guglielmo. "Defining America's Racial Boundaries," 107.

Latin America is ethnically colored man's land, which has been growing more colored for the past hundred years.<sup>14</sup>

These notions reflected the widespread belief of ordinary Anglos, many of whom also refused to recognize Mexicans as white. For example, a lawyer living in Texas opined, "Our people don't recognize them [Mexicans] as white people...there is the same race prejudice here as against the Negro." Furthermore, a Chamber of Commerce employee in Chicago stated that "the Mexicans are lower than the European peasants. They are not white and not Negro; they're Mexican."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States witnessed the growth of a strict as well as widely recognized racial hierarchy that enjoyed scientific backing. Consequently, segregation measures ensued, many of which were most prominently visible within public accommodations. Across the United States, and especially in the Southwest, the presence of Mexicans was prohibited in movie theatres, dance halls, parks, swimming pools, beaches, salons, drugstores, bowling alleys, restaurants, cemeteries, and so on. Exclusion was signaled in a variety of ways; for example, "white only" signs, leaflets, notices on menus, newspaper advertisements, city decrees, and or public announcements. In addition, segregation of Mexican students from Anglos existed in schools throughout the Southwest and in parts of the Midwest. Furthermore, racially restrictive housing covenants targeted Mexicans in cities from Illinois to California. In those cities where restrictive covenants did not exist, violence, deed restrictions, discriminatory realtor practices, and sometimes town ordinances were equally as effective.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fox and Guglielmo. "Defining America's Racial Boundaries," 354.

<sup>15</sup> Fox and Guglielmo. "Defining America's Racial Boundaries," 355.

<sup>16</sup> Fox and Guglielmo. "Defining America's Racial Boundaries," 359-360.

These racial boundaries were supported as well as institutionalized by courts. For instance, in Texas as well as in other areas in the Southwest, Mexicans were methodically excluded from jury service. In addition, many Mexicans in these areas faced voting obstacles. Select cities outright excluded them at the ballot box while other cities relied on voter intimidation – from both the public as well as authorities – to prevent them from voting. For example, local law enforcement within Corpus Christi, Texas threatened that “if they [Mexicans] could not read, write, and speak the English language and they voted, they would be put in the penitentiary.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, what existed throughout the Southwest was a patchwork of customs, practices, and local ordinances that enforced racial and ethnic subordination.

Discrimination within the occupational domain ensured the economic subjugation of Mexicans and, therefore, their restriction to the working class. Mexican laborers found themselves forced into dead-end and low paying jobs that were characterized by harsh working conditions. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the local economy was developing and expanding, particularly in the agricultural sector. The Reclamation Act of 1902, in particular, provided a significant boost for the agricultural economy of the Southwest; it provided for the building of dams and reservoirs which allowed a highly labor-intensive agricultural enterprise to develop in this arid region. For instance, cotton and sugar beet cultivation flourished in the Southwest as well as Texas. In addition, fruits and vegetables such as citrus, lettuce, spinach, beans, carrots, dates, cantaloupes, and nuts became important commodities, particularly in California.<sup>18</sup> These agricultural developments, in turn, promoted the creation of industries for the processing, canning, packing, and

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<sup>17</sup> Fox and Guglielmo. “Defining America’s Racial Boundaries,” 355.

<sup>18</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 110.

crafting of agricultural products.<sup>19</sup> In addition to agriculture, mining and lumber operations also gained momentum during this period. The extraction and processing of copper, quartz, and petroleum became prominent within Southwestern regions; as well, states such as Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico identified timber cutting as an extremely profitable economic activity.<sup>20</sup> What is significant about the growth in agriculture, mining, and lumber is that it was enabled by cheap and exploitable labor, specifically the colonized Mexicans who filled the lower ranks of the Southwestern economic order. Thus, Mexicans found themselves entrapped in unskilled and semiskilled positions. Albert Camarillo found that in 1910 64.2% of Mexicans were working in “low blue collar” jobs; this number increased to 68.6% in 1920.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, Mexican migration into the Southwest continued. Despite the exploitation that Mexican laborers faced in the United States, many believed that this paled in comparison to the situation which prompted their departure from Mexico. As historian Alan Knight explains, beneath the rhetoric of reformism, the social reality following the Mexican Revolution – which took place between 1910 and 1920 – was one of “disease, dearth, malnutrition, and poverty.”<sup>22</sup> During this time, labor strikes were frequent as workers attempted, and often failed, to secure decent and livable wages.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, American employers enjoyed the ability to exploit a cheap labor pool, within which many initially felt that they had no other viable options.

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Monroy. “An Essay on Understanding the Work Experience of Mexicans in Southern California, 1900-1939.” *Aztán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* Vol. 12 No. 1 (Spring 1981): 62.

<sup>20</sup> Estrada, García, Macías, and Maldonado, “Chicanos in the United States,” 110.

<sup>21</sup> Monroy. “An Essay on Understanding the Work Experience of Mexicans,” 60.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Knight. “The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution, c. 1900-1920.” *Journal of Latin American Studies* Vol. 16 No. 1 (Spring 1984): 76. Accessed March 25, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/157287>

<sup>23</sup> Knight, “The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution,” 76.

Thus, Mexican Americans were integrated into the United States under the influence of an imperialistic agenda as well as notions of racial supremacy. Their experience post-military conquest until the turn of the century was one of dispossession and displacement. 1900 to 1930 witnessed the hardening of the boundary between what was considered Mexican and white; racial violence, segregation, and occupational exploitation were the result.

This thesis will develop and add substance to this narrative by examining the experience of Mexican migratory labor in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, focusing specifically on California. Not only will the experience of migratory labor be considered, but so too will Mexican American attempts to organize and protest against the discrimination, exploitation, and destitution that will be revealed. Furthermore, this thesis will analyze the intellectual and congressional aid that was given to Mexican American laborers through an exploration of the synergy that developed between militant Mexican American activism and socially-conscious Anglo intellectuals.

Ultimately, this thesis proposes that the La Follette Committee – a byproduct of the newly developed New Deal liberal-labor coalition – offered a serious alternative to the tradition of Anglo intolerance towards Mexican Americans. It humanized them as well as proposed resolutions that would not only improve their condition in the labor market, but subsequently other areas of life as well. Indeed, Mexican Americans proved themselves capable of organizing effectively; and yes this was essential as they made themselves visible to middle class intellectuals who would force their struggle into government consciousness. However, Anglo discrimination against Mexican Americans was far too strong for change to be achieved via grassroots activism alone. Through its

congressional powerbase, the committee supported as well as elevated the massive and united Mexican uprisings and offered resolutions capable of changing the position of Mexicans within American society for decades to come. Not since 1916 and the release of the Commission on Industrial Relations, which advocated for the rights of industrial workers, had Congress defended the rights of a working class minority on such a scale. However, as will be demonstrated, conservative forces undermined the social reforms fought for by the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee. This aftermath as well as its repercussions will be explored in the conclusion to this thesis.

### *Historiography*

The significance of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee has, to a certain degree, been explored previously; most notably by historian Jerold S. Auerbach. However, his study of the Committee differs from this thesis in its focus. Auerbach's book, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, published in 1966, focuses on the legacy of the Committee in relation to civil liberties as a whole rather than to Mexican Americans specifically. This is evident when considering Auerbach's argument that the legacy of the La Follette Committee was its radical reinvention of the relationship between the government and civil liberties. The Committee, Auerbach holds, renamed the government as the protector of civil rights rather than the destroyer. He states that, "it is now taken for granted that the public interest is so great in the preservation of civil rights that the government, and the strongest governmental power available, should intervene to protect them."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jerold S. Auerbach. *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*. (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 218.

Furthermore, Auerbach's book differs from this thesis in that it places a greater emphasis on the La Follette Committee's ties to industrial rather than agricultural labor. While his book does dedicate some twenty pages to the Committee's proceedings in California, he dedicates the majority of the book to a focus on the "industrial warfare" of the Northeast. Auerbach's book is limited as well in the fact that it overlooks the experiences of minority workers such as Latinos as well as African Americans. His approach is logical in that the task of building an argument around the numerous findings and focuses of the La Follette Committee would be an incredibly daunting, and arguably inefficient, task. Therefore, this thesis will augment Auerbach's study by pursuing a different approach and by focusing specifically on the hearings conducted in California in relation to Mexican Americans.

Auerbach's book is well written, insightful, and has provided great aid to those studying the La Follette Committee; however, it is also important to note that it has become quite dated. It has been nearly fifty years since *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* was published. Since then, much secondary material has been generated that helps to better understand the period in which the La Follette Committee emerged. Thus, new studies of the Committee in which recent secondary material is considered are much needed. This is not to say, however, that works published since *Labor and Liberty* have not utilized La Follette Committee documents or included discussions of the Committee within larger contexts. Michael Dennis' *The Memorial Day Massacre and the Movement for Industrial Democracy* is one such work. This book explores the contributions of the La Follette Committee in forging the link between civil liberties and workers' rights. It differs from Auerbach in that it

examines this within the context of a broader social movement for industrial democracy, more specifically, within the context of the Memorial Day Massacre which took place in Chicago in 1937. Although the main focus of the work is on industrial labor within the Northeast, it does devote notable attention to Mexican industrial labor, particularly in Chicago and in the steel industry.

Auerbach's decision not to focus on the Committee, as it related to agricultural labor in California, did not go unnoticed. In 1968 Paul S. Taylor applauded Auerbach for his "evaluation of what was known as the La Follette Committee."<sup>25</sup> However, he also advocated the need for an analysis of the Committee in the context of agricultural labor. As he states, "the sources for the history of California's agricultural labor remain too largely unexploited."<sup>26</sup> In particular, he laments the absence of the documentation concerning the La Follette Committee's hearings in California which, he states, "constitutes one of the fullest public examinations of the status of labor in agriculture ever conducted."<sup>27</sup>

In 1975, Taylor's plea for an historical study of the labor movement in an agricultural rather than industrial context was answered. Cletus E. Daniel embodied as well as encouraged this approach in his article, "Radicals on the Farm in California". He stated that, "Historians of the American labor movement have, with only infrequent exceptions, tended to view their subject in an almost exclusively industrial, mainly urban, context...labor unionism in American agriculture has been largely obscured."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paul S. Taylor. "California Farm Labor: A Review." *Agriculture History Society* Vol. 42, No. 1 (January 1968): 49. Accessed October 27, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740184>.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, "California Farm Labor: A Review," 52.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, "California Farm Labor: A Review," 52.

<sup>28</sup> Cletus E. Daniel. "Radicals on the Farm in California." *Agricultural History* Vol. 49, No. 4 (October 1975): 629. Accessed October 27, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3741488>.

Furthermore, he proclaimed that the labor movement was just as prevalent in the agricultural sector as it was in the industrial domain. Therefore, the efforts of agricultural laborers to develop collective economic power on the job through unionization must be studied in addition to their disadvantaged status. Daniel continued to use this approach in his book, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers 1870-1941*, in which he combined an analysis of the powerlessness and misery of California farmworkers with their attempts to improve their condition through organizing.

Twenty-first century historians have drawn inspiration from Daniel's approach towards the agricultural labor history of the Southwest; however, they have also narrowed its focus. The need to consider both the disadvantaged status of farm workers as well as their efforts to organize is recognized; however, certain historians have advocated the need to focus on the experience of specific minority groups, particularly Mexican Americans. For example, in 2006 historian Vicki L. Ruiz dismissed notions portrayed by history as well as the popular media that Latinos constituted a people who arrived "the day before yesterday."<sup>29</sup> She proclaimed that generations of Mexicans have inhabited the United States and their experiences, as well as the experiences of Anglo citizens, contribute to the overall narrative of American history. "Nuestra América", she proclaims, "es historia Americana". In other words, "our America is American history."<sup>30</sup>

Zaragosa Vargas' book, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* is a prime example of an approach taken similar to Daniel's, but with a particular focus on Mexican Americans. Vargas chronicles the role

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<sup>29</sup> Vicki L Ruiz. "Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History." *Journal of American History* Vol. 93, No.3 (December 2006): 672. *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 27, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Ruiz, "Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History," 672.

of Mexican American workers – specifically in Texas, Colorado, and California – throughout the 1930s and 1940s; and in doing so documents the important role they played within the overall labor movement of the United States. Vargas explores the injustices that Mexican Americans faced throughout the Great Depression as well as the strikes and unionization that ensued. He suggests that union mobilization at the grassroots level played an important role in achieving Mexican American labor as well as civil rights.

Inextricable from an analysis of the La Follette Committee and the experience of the Mexican American working class throughout the 1920s and 1930s are the liberal and middle class intellectuals who participated in and were representative of a larger social movement that included the defense of labor and racial equality. This includes: Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, and Dorothea Lange. Thus, a brief discussion of the historiography of such individuals is imperative.

McWilliams' primary material, including his published works, personal papers, and so on, is vast and has undoubtedly been utilized within histories concerning Mexican Americans as well as other minorities in the context of Southwestern agricultural labor. Vargas' book, for instance, is a prime example. Since the 1980s, however, historians have begun to make use of such extensive primary material and a selection of secondary material devoted solely to the exploration of the life and works of McWilliams has been produced. For example, historian Greg Critser has published two articles entitled "The Political Rebellion of Carey McWilliams" and "The Making of a Cultural Rebel: Carey McWilliams, 1924-1930". The first work seeks to analyze the actual rebellion and

progressive activism in which McWilliams engaged throughout the 1930s and onward, while the second work seeks to explain its origins.

In 2003, Daniel Geary contributed to the works of Critser and published an article entitled “Carey McWilliams and Antifascism: 1934-1943”. In this article, Geary wishes to counter the claim, so often made by historians, that “antifascist rhetoric was too closely connected with Communist party policy to be useful in advancing a vigorous left-wing politics genuinely rooted in the American political situation.”<sup>31</sup> He argues, through a study of McWilliams, that a broad range of liberals and leftists did apply the metaphor of fascism to American society and, in addition to right-wing opposition, did experience widespread support for their protestations.

More recently, Peter Richardson has published a thorough and detailed book dedicated to McWilliams entitled *American Prophet: The Life & Works of Carey McWilliams*. As the title of the work suggests, Richardson fuses a discussion of McWilliams’ life with a discussion of the many works that he published throughout his career. Like Critser, he includes an analysis of the origins of McWilliams’ rebellion as well as explores his efforts on behalf of the social, political, and legal activism prevalent throughout the 1930s.

Similar to McWilliams, the studies, publications, and personal papers of Taylor are greatly utilized as primary sources within studies of Mexican American as well as other minority-dominated labor throughout the Southwest. Unlike McWilliams, however, secondary material devoted to an exploration of the life and work of Taylor remains scarce. Kara D. Schultz’ master’s thesis entitled “Progressive Scientism: Paul Schuster

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel Geary. “Carey McWilliams and Antifascism: 1934-1943.” *Journal of American History* Vol. 90, No. 3 (December 2003): 672. *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 25, 2014).

Taylor and the Making of Mexican Labor in the United States” and Jan Goggans’ book entitled “California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative” – which, as the title suggests, is dedicated to an exploration of both Dorothea Lange and Taylor – are two works which have made valiant contributions towards alleviating such scarcity. However, aside from Schultz’ and Goggans’ works, the most useful treatments of Taylor’s early life and academic career are found in historical biographies primarily dedicated to exploring the life and work of Lange. One such biography is Linda Gordon’s *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. This work is useful in that it provides an excellent analysis of the political activism of both Taylor and Lange throughout the 1930s; it also delves into the earlier lives of both individuals so as to provide context for the origins of such protest.

As this thesis will demonstrate, in order to understand the aforementioned liberal and middle class intellectuals, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal must be contextualized; for this is the political environment in which such intellectuals emerged. Numerous scholarships have been published in regards to this significant period that took place in American history throughout the 1930s. The two with which this thesis will make most significant use is Robert S. McElvaine’s *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* and Ronald Edsforth’s *The New Deal: America’s Response to the Great Depression*. In exploring the Depression decade, McElvaine provides a larger as well as intriguing analysis of the New Deal. His attempt at such an exploration from the perspective of governments and intellectuals as well as from the working class is admirable. As he states, the Great Depression was a time of “enormous upheaval from below and dramatic

innovation from above.”<sup>32</sup> In adopting this philosophy, McElvaine relays a deeper social as well as political history and in doing so provides a full and comprehensive study of America’s New Deal era. Edsforth’s work is also commendable. However, rather than devoting his analysis to a study of the New Deal within the larger context of Depression ravaged America, Edsforth provides a detailed analysis solely of the New Deal; this includes its philosophies as well as activities. Combined, McElvaine’s and Edsforth’s analyses are invaluable.

In addition to Roosevelt’s New Deal, Californian government personnel – such as Upton Sinclair and Culbert Olson – who subscribed to Roosevelt’s principles will be discussed so as to provide context for the progressive Californian environment in which McWilliams, Taylor, and Lange emerged. McElvaine’s work, within its larger narrative, includes a succinct yet detailed discussion of Sinclair and his contributions will be greatly utilized. In addition, Fay M. Blake and H. Morton Newman’s article entitled, “Upton Sinclair’s ‘EPIC’ Campaign”, provides an invaluable analysis which focuses solely on a description of the California gubernatorial election of 1934 and, more specifically, the candidacy of Sinclair. Great use will also be made of Kevin Starr’s *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*. Intent on emphasizing the liberalism that flourished in California during the Great Depression, this book provides excellent analysis both of Sinclair and Olson.

The second chapter to this thesis will focus on the discrimination and destitution felt by the Mexican working class throughout the late 1920s as well as throughout the 1930s. Moreover, it will focus on the subsequent Mexican American grassroots activism

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<sup>32</sup> Robert S McElvaine. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. (New York: Times Books, 2005), xiii.

to which such injustices gave rise. The third chapter will continue the narrative by analyzing liberal and middle class intellectuals – i.e., McWilliams, Taylor, and Lange – as well as the La Follette Committee. In doing so, it will be demonstrated that Mexican labor activism and middle class progressive commitment combined to support an awareness of the rights of people who had been treated as second-class citizens for years. The culmination of such awareness, and the emergence of the La Follette Committee, demonstrates not only that collective action and cross-class alliances could challenge the overarching system of the United States, but also that the system itself could be made responsible.

## **Chapter Two: The Problem**

### ***The Rise of Migrant Labor, the Experience of the Mexican Working Class, and the Mexican Grassroots Struggle for Change***

Before delving into an analysis of the efforts made by Carey McWilliams, Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the La Follette Committee to advance Mexican American labor and civil rights, it is imperative to analyze and explore the extent to which Mexicans were degraded and exploited in California during the late 1920s and into the 1930s. First, this chapter will consider the rise of migrant labor and the influx of a Mexican working class into California. Second, it will consider the characteristics of as well as the underlying motivations for the systemic racism that Mexican Americans – migrant workers in particular – experienced. Third, analysis will be provided as to how the Great Depression, that wreaked havoc throughout the United States during the 1930s, worsened the condition of Mexican Americans. Last to be discussed is the character as well as significance of the Mexican grassroots activism that arose in response to said discrimination and exploitation.

#### ***The Rise of Migrant Labor and the Influx of a Mexican Working Class in California***

During the 1920s, California saw a growth in labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crop production; by 1929 it had become home to more than one third of all large-scale farms in the western states. These farms, being seasonal in nature, depended on the availability of abundant migratory as well as cheap and exploitable labor. Year round, tens of thousands of migrant workers and their families moved throughout California to regions in which the demands of labor, weather conditions, and wage rates allowed. During the winter months, migrant workers coalesced in the Imperial Valley, harvesting

produce such as cantaloupe and lettuce, or in California's southern counties harvesting citrus fruits. In the spring, summer, and fall, workers continued to move throughout the Coastal Valley, the San Joaquin Valley, and the Sacramento Valley where fruits and vegetables such as grapes and asparagus needed to be harvested. During months in which there was a decrease in the demand for farm labor, workers either migrated back to Mexico for the time being or to Los Angeles County in hopes of finding work as day laborers. By 1930 Los Angeles had established itself as a major agricultural production and processing center; fruit and vegetable farms surrounded the county in order to meet the city's growing demands, and technological developments allowed for the expansion of food processing industries.<sup>33</sup>

Although the stream of migrant workers within California and throughout the United States was composed of a multiplicity of ethnicities – including Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese laborers – Governor C. C. Young's "Mexican Fact Finding Committee" demonstrates that California, by 1930, had become the locus for an increasing number of Mexicans. For instance, by 1928 the 134,300 Mexicans in Los Angeles represented ten percent of the city's total population as well as its largest single racial minority group. Furthermore, the study strongly asserts that Mexicans had "gained a strong foothold in California industries" and had undoubtedly supplanted "other immigrant races and Native Americans." In manufacturing establishments alone, approximately eleven out of every hundred wage earners were Mexican.<sup>34</sup> In California's agricultural domain, Mexicans constituted more than half of the workers in the

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<sup>33</sup> Zaragosa Vargas. *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth Century America*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 34-37.

<sup>34</sup> California's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee. *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C.C. Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*. (California State Printing Office, 1930), 36, 41, 95.

production of grapes and deciduous fruits, three-fourths of the workers in citrus fruits, and over 60 percent of the laborers in truck farm production. Furthermore, nine of ten large-scale farms of more than 640 acres used Mexican labor which they deemed vital and essential to the farms' profitability.<sup>35</sup>

One explanation for the desirability of Mexicans as a primary labor source within California has to do with the proximity of Mexico to American borders. Due to this proximity, Mexico was able to supply an enormous quantity of immigrants to the United States. Consequently, it was this proximity that afforded California growers the abundant labor supply required by large-scale and labor intensive agriculture as well as the ability to exploit Mexicans in a way that was different from other labor drawn from Asia or Southeastern Europe. As noted in the previous chapter, Mexican immigrants were, in fact, initially enthusiastic at the prospect of American prosperity, as many had been accustomed to the "disease, dearth, malnutrition, unemployment, and poverty" that followed the Mexican Revolution.<sup>36</sup> It was through strong lobbying that the growers maintained the abundance of Mexican labor within California. They opposed any immigration legislation that threatened their access to the Mexican workforce and argued that California's agriculture would collapse without the abundance of cheap labor that it now needed on large-scale farms. Growers faced few obstacles in their demands. The number of immigrants tripled between 1920 and 1930 and Mexican labor had unquestionably become a structural feature of the Southwestern economy.<sup>37</sup>

Mexican laborers were desirable for another reason and this has to do with the employment of a racial stereotype which Carey McWilliams has dubbed the "myth of

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<sup>35</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Knight, "The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution," 76.

<sup>37</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 16, 35.

docility”. McWilliams – author, editor, lawyer, and political activist – explains that when the wave of Mexican immigration pushed into California, growers as well as manufacturers were, at first, altogether enthusiastic in regards to Mexican labor.<sup>38</sup> Not only did it supply the abundance necessary to sustain the state’s agriculture, but growers saw in Mexicans a lack of ambition for upwards mobility as well as a lack of intellectual capacity to achieve any such ambitions if they did arise. Thus, employers viewed the Mexican working class as naive, controllable, and exploitable. For instance, Dr. George P. Clements, director of the agricultural department of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, firmly stated that “no labor that has ever come to the United States is more satisfactory...the Mexican as a result of years of servitude, has always looked upon his employer as his patron, and upon himself as part of the establishment.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover,

He is ignorant of values; he knows nothing of time; he knows nothing of our laws; he is as primitive as we were 2,500 years ago. He does not know our language...he rarely if ever takes out his citizenship, mixes in politics, or labor squabbles...He is the most tractable individual that ever came to serve us.<sup>40</sup>

Affirming the sentiments of Dr. Clements, Ralph Taylor, editorial spokesman for the large shipper-grower interests, wrote the following: “The Mexican has no political ambitions; he does not aspire to dominate the political affairs of the community in which he lives.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, a prominent physician within Pasadena added that Mexicans were “not much more than a group of fairly intelligent collie dogs.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Carey McWilliams. *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United-States*. New ed., updated by Matt S. Meier. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 173.

<sup>39</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 174.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel. *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1982), 105.

<sup>41</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 105.

### *Discrimination and Conditions Faced by the Mexican Working Class*

Before delving into the discrimination as well as conditions that faced Mexican laborers in California during the late 1920s as well as the 1930s, it is imperative to emphasize that all those of Mexican descent, whether immigrant or native-born to the United States, were subject to such treatment. As McWilliams states, amongst themselves, native-borns and immigrants celebrated their differences. Moreover, their attitudes towards one another had always been highly ambivalent. In the eyes of the native-born, the immigrant was a “cholo” or a “chicamo”, otherwise known as a Mexican of a lower class. Moreover, in the eyes of the immigrant, the native-born was a “pocho”, otherwise known as a Mexican who had abandoned Mexico’s culture as well as people. Furthermore, while immigrants stressed their Mexican-Indian background, native-borns emphasized their Spanish inheritance in blood as well as culture. In doing so, native-borns hoped to distinguish themselves, in the eyes of Anglo-Americans, from the immigrants. They consistently referred to themselves as, not Mexican, but Spanish-Colonials, Latin-Americans, Spanish-Americans, or “native Californians”. Despite these distinctions, however, Anglo Americans regarded these two groups as one – Mexican.<sup>43</sup> For example, Robert E. Forester, professor of economics at Princeton University, stated the following in regards to the racial composition of Mexico:

From the survey which has been given of the population of Mexico it must be plain that the pure Spanish element is small, that the century which brought many millions of white immigrants to the United States brought very few immigrants even of Spanish origin to Mexico, and that the basic race of the country is Indian, either pure-blooded or mixed with white stock.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 191.

<sup>44</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 41.

Furthermore, Dr. George P. Clements estimated that about 13,000,000 of the 15,000,000 Mexicans in Mexico were “made up of hundreds of distinct Indian tribes as primitive as [American] Indians were when the first colonists arrived in America.” According to Dr. Clements, these were the Mexicans that immigrated into the United States. “It is generally conceded,” states Clements, “that the bulk of the immigration from Mexico into the United States is from the pure Indian or the Mestizo stock of the Mexican population.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, native-borns found the emphasis they had placed on their Spanish, rather than Indian or Mestizo inheritance, invalidated. Consequently, it became impossible for them to dissociate themselves from the immigrants as well as from the racial and labor discriminations that they faced. The character and extent of such discriminations will now be discussed.

Relatively young and made up of large families with many American born children, the Mexican’s sole economic and social purpose was as follows: they constituted an easily exploitable workforce that could be submitted to oppressive forms of work with little to no questions asked. Governor Young’s Mexican Fact Finding Committee and the writings of McWilliams reveal that the jobs for which Mexicans were employed en masse were undesirable, labor-intensive, oppressive and, as noted earlier, often migratory and seasonal. Thus, constant movement characterized the lives of migrant workers and their families. Families traveled together, in travel and car caravans throughout California’s fruit and vegetable districts in an attempt to maintain as many successive work days as possible. Consequently, approximately one-third of the year was spent seeking work and living in different locations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 35, 36.

Such uncertainty in steady employment ensured low as well as discriminatory wages for Mexican migrant workers. Governor Young's Committee reveals that prior to the Great Depression Mexican laborers were paid as little as 35 cents per hour while their white counterparts were paid 40 cents per hour for similar work. With the Depression, Mexican wage rates sank to approximately 15 or 14 cents per hour.<sup>47</sup> As historian Cletus E. Daniels asserts, "a worker's presence in the migratory farm-labor force could usually be regarded as conclusive evidence of his powerlessness to escape what was commonly acknowledged to be the most disadvantaged and degraded occupational status in California."<sup>48</sup>

During the offseason, when families migrated off the farm to manufacturing plants such as canneries in Los Angeles, conditions remained bleak. Despite the increasing diversification of the local economy – including the arrival of auto, aircraft, rubber, and steel industries – Mexicans remained restricted to the dirtiest, lowest-paying, and most oppressive jobs as common or unskilled laborers. Moreover, it is because Mexicans were limited to this certain kind of employment that they represented within Los Angeles a huge surplus in labor which, as Vargas states, "teetered on the edge of deprivation."<sup>49</sup>

It is imperative to emphasize that entire families participated in the migrant labor effort. Employers actively recruited Mexican women and children to maintain a cheap and docile surplus labor pool. In spite of California's child labor and compulsory school attendance laws, Mexican children toiled alongside their parents in orchards, fields, and factories to maximize the family's earning potential. Evidence of the absence of Mexican

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<sup>47</sup> California's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 170.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 36, 38.

children from school is found in an interview with Edith Lowry which was conducted during the “Interstate Migration Hearings” of 1940. Lowry, the executive secretary of the Council of Women for Home Missions, an organization that investigated as well as provided aid to migrant families, was asked if the education of migrant children was comparable to that of resident children. She replied, “...they have the same capabilities and this would be evident if they had the same opportunities.”<sup>50</sup>

Mexican women, in addition to working on the farm, were especially utilized within manufacturing plants where they were disproportionately assigned to unskilled work prevalent within canning as well as garment industries. Being a seasonal industry, canning lasted only ten to eleven weeks per year. During peak summer processing seasons, California’s canneries employed from 60,000 to 70,000 workers while in the winter months the workforce shrank to at most 13,000 food processors.<sup>51</sup> Workers were composed mainly of women. For instance, Governor Young’s Committee discovered that within three major Los Angeles canneries only 11.2 percent of the total Mexican labor force was male while 88.8 percent was female.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Vargas estimates that throughout the 1930s, Mexican women made up approximately three-fourths of the total workers in California’s canneries.<sup>53</sup> In addition to a seasonal and, therefore, unstable work schedule, women found themselves working in fast paced production – including washing, grading, cutting, canning, and drying – for which they were grossly underpaid; more so than their male counterparts. For example, men holding less intensive positions

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<sup>50</sup> United States. Congress. House. Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. *Interstate Migration: New York City Hearings*. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 306. <https://archive.org/details/interstatemigrat01unit>

<sup>51</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 87.

<sup>53</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 37.

in warehouses earned up to \$26.64 per week while these women earned as little as \$16.55.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the American working class was bifurcated by ethnicity as well as gender and, consequently, Mexican women found their situation to be one of the most deplorable in Southwestern society.

Seasonal employment in garment industries brought no improvement for female Mexican laborers. In the 1930s, within Los Angeles, Mexican women holding unskilled and semiskilled positions made up 75 percent of the labor force within this industry. Not only was this work seasonal in nature, but labor turnover, speedup, and homework characterized the job. One 1930s labor organizer stated the following in regards to the experience of Mexican women in the garment industry: “thousands in [the] industry slaved under the most degrading and humiliating conditions, with no control of hours and wages; no place to go for the redress of grievances.”<sup>55</sup>

This lack of control that Mexican men, women, and children alike had over their labor predicament is explained through the following: by 1930 an industrial-relations structure had emerged throughout California that gave employers the power to define the terms and conditions of Mexican employment. Mexicans worked, not for individual citrus growers, but for the California Fruit Growers Exchange. Within the exchange, grower associations were able to organize regionally into private labor bureaus which enabled them to recruit workers and fix wages. Subsequently, surpluses of labor were created, low costs were guaranteed, and the competition for workers during periods of high demand was eradicated. With competition eliminated and near total control over

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<sup>54</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 37-38.

workers ensured, low wages and oppressive working conditions became increasingly invulnerable to change.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to exercising control over wage rates and recruitment, employers ensured that no ladder of advancement was provided for Mexican workers within their enterprises. As McWilliams states, “One could count on the fingers of one hand the number of Mexicans who have become owners of citrus groves or who have risen to management positions in the exchange.”<sup>57</sup> McWilliams’ comment is supported by a number of statements made by select firms who contributed to Young’s Mexican Fact Finding Committee. For instance, in regards to Mexicans, one firm plainly stated that they “seldom hire them in important positions, such as distributing or heads of departments.”<sup>58</sup> Moreover, when asked about female Mexican employees, a canning company said the following: “Mexican women are desirable...they are accustomed to working in fruit, and most of them have always wandered from place to place working in dry yards and canneries.” However, in addition, the company stated that “they are not desired in the packing department. White women are apt to look neater and to be better dressed, giving the packing department a better appearance.”<sup>59</sup> Another firm noted something similar, and stated that the manager of the firm had “never desired to employ [Mexican women] as packers.” Furthermore, “[the] plant wishes to have record of having white women do [the] final handling of fruit.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, Mexican men as well as women were not only restricted to the lowest and most undesirable forms of work, but employers ensured that they were destined to stay there. Packing houses resembled a small step from

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 71 and Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 196.

<sup>58</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 92.

<sup>59</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 94.

<sup>60</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 94.

washing, grading, cutting, canning, and drying fruit. However, this work was prestigious in the fact it required the final handling of the product and, as demonstrated above, employers would not allow even this small increase in prestige for Mexicans.

In addition to the conclusions drawn above, the aforementioned comments provide an impetus for an even deeper analysis concerning the conditions of Mexican labor. The claim that white women were better suited to more prestigiously regarded positions suggests that the force motivating the exploitation and subjugation of the Mexican working class was not only economic, but racial in nature. This coincides with Vargas' claim that "employers integrated the Southwest's tradition of racism into the edifice of labor relations" and that "racism inexorably determined how the Mexican would be employed."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, historian Cletus E. Daniels states that "the overriding explanation of the captive occupational status of nonwhite farmworkers lay in the fact that they were distinct racial minorities in a society that simply would not tolerate their free and equal participation in the economic life of the state."<sup>62</sup> A closer look at the data collected by Governor Young's committee adds additional substance to these arguments.

Of the 312 manufacturing firms interviewed by the committee 30 firms reported Mexican labor to be on the whole unsatisfactory,<sup>63</sup> the reasons being that this particular race of people possessed certain unshakable and undesirable characteristics. For instance, numerous firms questioned the work ethic as well as ambition of Mexicans. One stated that "in the main they are lazy and slow." Another reaffirmed this statement and asserted that they too "have found they are lazy as a rule."<sup>64</sup> In addition to work ethic, the

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<sup>61</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> California's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 92.

<sup>64</sup> California's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 92.

intelligence, cleanliness, and honorability of Mexicans were routinely degraded. The most common disadvantages cited by employers were the following: ignorant, unhygienic, dirty, slow, limited intelligence, thieving, untrustworthy, and tricky. Among 288 canneries interviewed, 255 of 288 employed one or more of these unfavorable characteristics.<sup>65</sup>

Those 30 manufacturing firms which reported negatively on Mexican labor may seem small in comparison to those 200 plus who reported Mexican labor to be desirable. However, a closer look at these comments reveals that the “compliments” given to Mexican laborers arose only from their ability to be exploited. Employers did not believe Mexicans had the capacity to fulfill any other standard of work other than the grueling type in which they already found themselves. For example, one firm stated that “Mexican labor is satisfactory when placed in occupations fitted for.” Furthermore, “they fit well on jobs not requiring any great degree of mentality, and they do not object to dirt.” Another commented, “In dirtier jobs they are very efficient,” and another added, “they are fitted for the work for which they are employed.”<sup>66</sup>

In restricting Mexicans to the lowest forms of employment, and encouraging racial stereotypes, employers succeeded in setting Mexicans apart from other employees. This distinction encouraged prejudice far beyond employers and into the public sphere. As McWilliams argues, by employing *large* numbers of Mexicans for *particular* types of work, employers had arbitrarily limited the chance for any type of acculturation. Thus, not only were Mexicans portrayed as “inferior”, but the stereotype was reinforced with an

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<sup>65</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 162.

<sup>66</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 92.

appearance of reality.<sup>67</sup> For instance, Dr. Emory S. Bogardus stated the following: “There are people who insist on thinking that the Mexican is unable to rise above an unskilled labor level. They cannot visualize a Mexican immigrant on any other plane.”<sup>68</sup>

The poverty as well as employer prejudice outlined above further impacted Mexican laborers in that they restricted them to living quarters which, as Young’s committee states, were simple as well as subject to primitive sanitation.<sup>69</sup> However, before detailing the living conditions that characterized the lives of Mexican workers, it is important to note the extent to which racism – in addition to poverty and migration – dictated where Mexicans could reside. As Governor Young’s committee states, Mexicans in California tended to live in colonies separate from Anglos; the existence of “Little Mexicos,” both urban and rural, was common knowledge. Moreover, this was largely due to prejudice since many owners were reluctant to rent their buildings to Mexican tenants in Anglo-dominated neighborhoods. Although the majority of realty boards did not explicitly exclude Mexicans from living in certain areas, many did in fact consciously construct clauses to be inserted within deed and sale contracts that prevented Mexicans from living in certain communities. For example, these clauses often restricted occupants to “persons of Caucasian race”. However, it should not be overlooked that in some instances it was Mexicans who were definitively specified as prohibited from occupancy. In all, an inquiry sent to realty boards in a variety of cities across California revealed that 24 of 47 of those communities had segregated districts composed of Mexicans, or Mexicans and other foreigners.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 196.

<sup>68</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 196.

<sup>69</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 176.

Further evidence exists to suggest the concentration of Mexicans in separate localities and districts than Anglos. For instance, a number of counties – Imperial, Kern, Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, and Ventura – held public elementary schools with over 90 percent Mexican enrollment. Governor Young’s committee asserts that these schools were not separate schools in mixed districts to which Mexicans had to send their children due to segregation measures. Rather, they were regular public schools and the “almost exclusive enrollment of Mexicans [was] due to the fact that the district [was] inhabited by virtually none but Mexicans.”<sup>71</sup> It is significant to note that this data does not contradict previous evidence to suggest the absence of Mexican youth from school. These high enrollment rates apply to public *elementary* schools. Children tended to sacrifice school for work in larger numbers as they aged and, thus, became able-bodied workers.

Due to constant movement, the homes of migratory Mexican laborers were often located in semi-permanent or seasonal camps. McWilliams estimates that approximately 150,000 to 200,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were scattered throughout Southern California, Los Angeles excluded. Roughly 80 percent of this number lived in “colonies” or “colonias” which varied in size from a cluster of small homes or shacks to communities of up to ten thousand people. Many of these settlements were located near major towns and cities, but were unquestionably detached. According to McWilliams, and as a way to enforce segregation, they were often located on the “other side” of something. For instance, a railroad track, a bridge, a river, or a highway.<sup>72</sup> Fred W. Ross states,

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<sup>71</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 197-98.

Plainly, it was never intended that colonias were to be a part of the wider community; rather, it was meant that they were to be apart from it in every way; colonia residents were to live apart, work apart, play apart, worship apart, and unfortunately trade, in some cases, apart.<sup>73</sup>

Semi-permanent forms of residences within colonias were often unpainted, weather-beaten, and dilapidated shacks built with scrap lumber, boxes, and discarded odds-and-ends of material. The majority of shacks consisted of one or two rooms and lacked electricity as well as inside toilets and baths.<sup>74</sup> Paul S. Taylor – a progressive economist known for his investigations concerning migrant workers – writes that often, kitchens too were located in separate shelters outside the house.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, because colonias were segregated from the larger cities and towns they lacked municipal services. For example, water had to be purchased from private suppliers at rates higher than those paid by Anglo dominated towns and cities.<sup>76</sup> McWilliams writes that Mexicans came to resent their situation and deplorable living conditions. He writes,

Living in ramshackle homes in cluttered-up-run-down shacktowns, set apart from their neighbors, denied even the minimum civic services, the residents of the colonia came to resent the fenced in character of their existence. They were perfectly well aware of the fact that they were not wanted, for their segregation was enforced by law as well as by custom and opinion.<sup>77</sup>

During periods of intense migration, Mexican laborers and their families resided in impermanent settlements and company labor camps, the conditions of which were even more deplorable than those of the colonias described above. During his study of Mexican labor in the Imperial Valley during the late 1920s, Taylor discovered that impermanent labor camps consisted mainly of tents, which Mexicans generally supplied

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<sup>73</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 199.

<sup>74</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 198.

<sup>75</sup> California's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 179.

<sup>76</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 198.

<sup>77</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 199.

themselves. In place of tents, families would often stretch pieces of canvas across poles. Sometimes the shelters were nothing more than a roof and one to three walls constructed from arrow weed ramada. The inspectors of the State Housing Commission, Taylor writes, attempted to enforce certain minimum standards. For instance, they proclaimed that all residences must include, at the very least, tents, beds, screened cook houses and toilets, bathing facilities, and garbage disposal. Employers, however, often ignored these proclamations and inspectors of the State Housing Commission experienced difficulty in enforcing them. Taylor, who by this time viewed the California agricultural system with distain, confirmed that these standards were “by no means universally observed.”<sup>78</sup>

Moving to Los Angeles did not result in improved conditions; semi-permanent and impermanent settlements there followed a similar pattern to those throughout the rest of the Southwest. Mexicans, McWilliams states, were scattered in “pockets” of settlements throughout the city. The various pocket-settlements, he holds, “were almost exclusively Mexican and were, if anything, more severely isolated than the colonias of the outlying sections.”<sup>79</sup> For instance, the “Mexican sections” throughout Los Angeles often had the city’s highest rents and the poorest homes. Moreover, segregation was rampant and prevented Mexicans from enjoying access to public services, recreational facilities, and education.<sup>80</sup>

Semi-permanent settlements were all similar in character, thus, a closer look at Chavez Ravine represents a closer look at semi-permanent settlements in general. Throughout the settlement, shacks clung to hillsides or collected in small clusters at the bottom of the ravine. Similar to the outlying colonias, shacks were unpainted as well as

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<sup>78</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 179.

<sup>79</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 203.

<sup>80</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 36.

weather beaten and fundamental municipal services were absent. Rural mailboxes could be seen tacked to large boards as though, McWilliams writes, “they were living, not in the heart of a great city, but in some small rural village in the Southwest.” Goats and chicken pens cluttered the village which lacked paved streets. Garbage was seldom collected and, as McWilliams notes, the service was nothing compared to that which could be obtained in the Anglo districts which bordered the ravine.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to deteriorating living structures and a lack of municipal services, semi-permanent settlements such as Chavez Ravine were also plagued by health hazards. In regards to malnutrition, members of the Los Angeles County Health Department found that in the average Mexican community, 158 houses had sufficient, yet somewhat lacking, nutrition and 64 had food which was distinctly scant. Moreover, for preserving food, only 9 households had refrigerators, 128 had screened cupboards or coolers, and 180 had no provisions whatsoever for keeping food in good condition.<sup>82</sup> Unsurprisingly, tuberculosis was rampant throughout these communities and infant mortality rates within Los Angeles were three times higher for Mexicans than they were for Anglos.<sup>83</sup> McWilliams, providing a final and powerful image of the Chavez Ravine community, writes, “Ancient automobile bodies clutter up the landscape and various dumps are scattered about.” Moreover, “In this socially regressive dead-end, goats bleat and roosters crow and children play in the dirt roads.”<sup>84</sup> Not only do these observations suggest the deplorable and unsanitary conditions facing Mexicans in semi-permanent settlements such as Chavez Ravine, but the image of children playing in a “socially regressive dead-

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<sup>81</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 203.

<sup>82</sup> California’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, *Mexicans in California*, 178.

<sup>83</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 203.

end” emphasizes the difficulty faced by Mexicans, even of future generations, to escape their dictated position within society.

In Los Angeles, the impermanent company labor camps showed no improvement. Commenting on the Pacific Electric labor camp, McWilliams observed forty Mexican families living as though they were in a small village in Jalisco, Mexico. Four showers were provided for 120 residents and hot water was limited to only Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. Furthermore, the only facilities for washing clothes or dishes were communal sinks located outside and away from the shacks. Unsurprisingly, and as with semi-permanent settlements, infant mortality rates and tuberculosis skyrocketed within these impermanent communities.<sup>85</sup>

In restricting the Mexican working class to such low standards of living, Anglo authority succeeded in emphasizing and solidifying the distinction between what was to be considered white and what was to be considered Mexican. Segregating Mexicans and subjecting them to conditions of such deplorable standards not only challenged Mexican morale, but encouraged wider Anglo support of the Mexican exploitation and discrimination practiced by employers. Even Anglos belonging to the lowest of Californian classes were able to claim exemption from the group considered to be the most destitute within Southwestern society.

### ***The Impact of the Great Depression: Mexican Repatriation***

During the 1930s the United States suffered its most severe depression which plunged an already impoverished Mexican population into even greater depths of destitution. By 1932 the Great Depression had completely engulfed American society.

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<sup>85</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 204.

Since 1929, national income had declined more than fifty percent and manufacturing output was just over half of what it had been three years earlier. Business failures were increasing exponentially and nearly twelve million workers were unemployed. Moreover, those workers who managed to maintain work found themselves plagued by shorter hours and drastic cuts in wage rates. Consequently, poverty increased rapidly, especially among urban workers and their families.<sup>86</sup> Undoubtedly, the Great Depression had a negative impact on a variety and a great number of people. However, as this thesis will now consider, the Depression undeniably had a unique and significant impact on California's Mexican working class; a story that is all too often excluded from accounts of the Depression.

The Great Depression upset the traditional streams of Mexican migratory labor as the employment situation in California saw a drastic increase in labor surpluses. By January 1933, California's farm labor surplus stood at an estimated 2.36 workers for each farm job. Consequently, a large number of Mexicans found themselves thwarted in their efforts to obtain employment. In April 1930, for instance, the jobless rate among Mexicans in Los Angeles stood at 14 percent, and it rose to 20 percent by the end of the year.<sup>87</sup> Those Mexicans who did manage to maintain work found themselves victim to other challenges including reductions in wage rates as well as workdays. For instance, in 1929 in the Imperial Valley growers reduced the cantaloupe harvest from 14,378 boxcars to 6,055 boxcars, and the valley's lettuce harvest dropped from 12,608 to 6,356 boxcars. Moreover, from 1928-1932, wage rates for cotton pickers in the Imperial Valley had

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<sup>86</sup> Ronald Edsforth. *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression*. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 46-47.

<sup>87</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 42, 53.

dropped from \$1.50 to 40 cents per hundred pounds harvested.<sup>88</sup> Those Mexicans who could not find work or were discharged from previous positions were forced to migrate out of California and into other states in search of work; an estimated 15,000 Mexicans participated in this exodus. However, finding only similar poverty in these regions – especially after the onset of the Dust Bowl, which wreaked havoc on the economy of the prairies during the early 1930s – many of these migrants felt they had no choice but to return to Mexico.<sup>89</sup>

Unemployment as well as the reduction in already impoverishing wage rates forced many of California's Mexican families to seek relief assistance. Having exhausted their limited resources, desperate and underfed families had resorted to sifting through garbage in order to feed themselves. Without work, the very livelihoods of Mexican families depended on getting relief.

In 1931, in Los Angeles, Mexicans made up more than one fourth of all city residents on public assistance. Moreover, they constituted one third of the city's private charity cases. However, the prospect of providing relief to Mexicans enraged Anglo citizens. Consequently, during 1931-1932 the Los Angeles County relief budget was reduced from \$4,209,725 to \$3,346,050 and half the Mexican families that the County Welfare Department was caring for were forced off relief so that preference could be given to Anglos. California's private charities, also undergoing budget reductions, opted to decrease the funds allocated to Mexicans as well. For instance, food allowances for

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<sup>88</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 42.

<sup>89</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 42.

Mexicans were cut by 25 percent whereas food grants for Anglo families were cut by only 10 percent.<sup>90</sup>

Relief assistance was not the only issue that encouraged as well as increased anti-Mexican sentiment. Anglos who were thrown out of work due to the continuing economic crisis demanded that employers not only stop hiring Mexicans, but discharge those already employed as well. In the midst of economic depression, Anglo workers immediately swallowed their pride and demanded their right to obtain what were previously considered to be the demeaning jobs only fit for Mexican labor. In 1931, the California legislature passed the Alien Labor Act which resulted in the elimination of Mexican laborers employed in various building construction projects throughout the state. Instantly, the following catchphrase loomed over the manufacturing and agricultural employers of California: “Employ no Mexican while a white man is unemployed. Get the Mexican back into Mexico regardless by what means.”<sup>91</sup>

Getting the Mexican back into Mexico is exactly the action that President Hebert Hoover would initiate. In order to deflect attention away from his inability to deal with the economic crisis, Hoover publicly denounced the Mexican as one of the Depression’s root causes. Subsequently, he ordered that Mexicans become the objects of an official removal program. In early January 1931, various city newspapers announced that the deportation campaign would commence on January 6. In theory, repatriation was intended to remove only illegal Mexican immigrants, however, in practice repatriation victimized Mexicans who were U.S. citizens, legal residents who entered the country before there were official measures in place to confirm their legal immigration, or

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<sup>90</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 45.

<sup>91</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 46.

residents unable to show proof of their legal status due to poverty and constant migration. Because Mexican laborers were constantly on the move, it became difficult for them to show proof of continuous employment and residency. Additionally, many workers had lived communally in order to save on living expenses. Furthermore, not only was the reproduction of vital records proving status – such as birth certificates and baptism records – unaffordable to the majority of Mexicans, such information was often also unavailable as a result of improper record keeping, including the misspelling and misfiling of names.<sup>92</sup>

The enforcement of Mexican repatriation was multifaceted. First, repatriation was carried out federally by U.S. Labor Department agents who staged raids in order to seek out and repatriate “illegal” Mexicans. Second, due to impatience with the federal government’s supposed inefficiency, local and county officials conducted their own raids to supplement federal action. City police as well as U.S. Labor Department agents participated in sweeps of working-class neighborhoods and forced their way into Mexican homes, often without warrants or advanced warnings.<sup>93</sup> Defenseless Mexican families, once found, had little choice but to cooperate and return to Mexico. McWilliams, who watched the first shipment of repatriated Mexicans leave Los Angeles, witnessed the vulnerability of these families. He states, “The loading process began at six o’clock in the morning. Repatriados arrived by the truckload – men, women, and children – with dogs, cats, and goats; half-open suitcases, rolls of bedding, and lunch baskets.”<sup>94</sup>

Repatriation was, on the whole, widely accepted by the inhabitants of California. Local and federal authorities justified the numerous civil rights violations that took place

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<sup>92</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 48, 58.

<sup>93</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 49, 50.

<sup>94</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 176.

by claiming that saving jobs for white American workers was more important than protecting the rights of Mexicans. Charles P. Visel, coordinator of the Local Citizen's Unemployment Relief Committee of Los Angeles, urged the U.S. Labor Department to send even more immigration officers to Los Angeles so that the process of repatriation could be intensified.<sup>95</sup> Local media outlets were quick to defend repatriation as well. For instance, newspapers boasted of the dollars it would inevitably save taxpayers. *The Torrance Herald*, for example, reasoned that the,

Average cost of repatriating the Mexicans has been \$15.68, while it costs the country \$34 a month to care for the average Mexican welfare case, which is figured at 4.25 persons. Computing on this basis, [repatriation] has saved the taxpayers of the country \$765,789 net to date.<sup>96</sup>

The media consistently, and consciously, failed to mention the numerous injustices of repatriation as well as the forced deportations of numerous Mexican American citizens as well as legal residents.

There exist numerous debates concerning the exact number of Mexicans repatriated during the Great Depression. In 1972 Abraham Hoffman affirmed that Mexican repatriation had not been documented well statistically. He questioned the ability of eyewitness accounts – such as that of McWilliams – to determine an exact number of the Mexican repatriates.<sup>97</sup> Vargas' recent publication estimates that between 1930 and 1935, 345,839 Mexicans were repatriated or deported back to Mexico, with the years 1931 and 1932 representing the peak of the expulsions, when more than one third

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<sup>95</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 50.

<sup>96</sup> "Mexican People Living in Torrance Prefer to Remain." *Torrance Herald*, December 1, 1932. Accessed January 26, 2015. [http://www.torranceca.gov/archivednewspapers/Herald/1932 %20Feb%20-%201934%20March%2029/PDF/00000451.pdf](http://www.torranceca.gov/archivednewspapers/Herald/1932%20Feb%20-%201934%20March%2029/PDF/00000451.pdf).

<sup>97</sup> Abraham Hoffman. "Mexican Repatriation Statistics: Some Suggested Alternatives to Carey McWilliams." *The Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 3No. 4 (October 1972): 391-404

of them were sent back.<sup>98</sup> This thesis contends that while statistics are valuable in visualizing the magnitude of events such as this one, an exact estimate is not the defining issue. *Hispano America*, a Mexican newspaper published in California, reveals in a different way the magnitude of this event. In January 1931, the paper had stated that Mexico was expecting a few thousand Mexicans to return. Moreover, it affirmed that it had taken part in adequate preparations to handle the situation with ease.<sup>99</sup> However, in April 1931, the narrative changed drastically. The paper claimed that Mexicans were arriving to Mexico from the U.S. in unprecedented numbers, so much so that the Mexican economy was disrupted drastically. It states, “Undoubtedly, the problem of repopulating the territory is one of the most serious problems that the country has ever faced”.<sup>100</sup> The column then expressed concern for the expenses that now confronted Mexico; for example, it states,

[Mexico] will have to deal with the significant expenses involved in new irrigation projects, clearing fields, building houses for settlers, etc...also to be taken into account are the expenses involved in sustaining repatriated families until they produce enough to be self-sufficient<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 61.

<sup>99</sup> “El gobierno ayuda la repatriacion.” *Hispano America*, January 24, 1931. Accessed January 26, 2015. <http://cdm15399.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15399coll2/id/13065/rec/1>.

<sup>100</sup> “La repoblacion del territorio sur de la baja California pronto sera un hecho.” *Hispano America*, April 4, 1931. Accessed January 26, 2015. <http://content.library.arizona.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15399coll2/id/13155/rec/2>.  
*The above quotation has been translated from Spanish: “Es indudable que el problema de la repoblación del Territorio es uno de los más serios que se han presentado a las autoridades de esta entidad.”*

<sup>101</sup> “La repoblacion del territorio sur de la baja California pronto sera un hecho.”  
*The above quotation is translated from Spanish: “...pues se tendrá que hacer frente a fuertes erogaciones en nuevas obras de irrigación, desmonte de campos de cultivo, construcción de casas para colonos, etc. Si a esto se agrega el alto costo de la vida en la península, tomando en cuenta los gastos que origine el sostenimiento de las familias repatriadas mientras producen lo suficiente para bastarse a sí mismas.”*

Thus, exact estimates aside, it is important to note that the magnitude of Mexican repatriation was significant; so significant that Mexico, as a nation, struggled to maintain balance under its weight.

### ***Grassroots Mexican Activism***

The dismal situation in which Mexicans found themselves within the U.S. provided the impetus for spirited collective action. McWilliams asserts that, at first, Mexican workers were in fact pleased with the new opportunities they found in California and the rest of the border states. “But,” he states, “as they came to realize that the occupations assigned them and the conditions under which they worked were regarded by American urban labor as undesirable and substandard, they began to show signs of restiveness.”<sup>102</sup> Low wages, irregular employment, harsh and abusive working conditions, and an utterly degraded standard of living had characterized the lives of California’s Mexican farm laborers for decades. To the Mexican working class, an agricultural labor movement promised to alleviate their oppressed economic situation and their endemic powerlessness. Additionally, it afforded them a channel through which they could challenge the ethnic discrimination and segregation that they had experienced for decades. In fact, it was this shared ethnicity that ultimately provided the Mexican working class a degree of cohesion that made collective activism not only possible, but also a force to be reckoned with. Anti-racism, ethnicity, and nationalism quickly became central principles of the Mexican working-class struggle. Dr. R. W. Rosskelly, of the Colorado State Agricultural College, argued that the origins of the Mexican workers’ movement were inarguable. “Logic,” he wrote,

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<sup>102</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 174.

suggests the impossibility of scoffing at the Mexican culture patterns, of indoctrinating them with those of the Nordics and still expecting them to perform a type of labor and life under conditions which Nordic standards taboo. Neither can it be expected that they will willingly relegate themselves to the status of second-class citizens in a country where equal opportunity, regardless of race, is the symbol of freedom.<sup>103</sup>

The magnitude as well as the significance of the collective action mounted by Mexican laborers is unprecedented. As McWilliams affirms, the 1930s witnessed in California a series of spectacular strikes. Furthermore,

Beyond question the strikes of these years [were] without precedent in the history of labor in the United States. Never before [had] farm laborers organized on any such scale and never before [had] they conducted strikes of such magnitude and such far-reaching social significance.<sup>104</sup>

It was, in fact, the Mexicans on the farms of California who had successfully initiated this massive strike wave. Dr. Stuart Jamieson asserted that the most effective agricultural labor unions of the 1930s “were those organized by Mexicans.”<sup>105</sup> “Long charged with a lack of ‘leadership’ and talent for organization,” McWilliams adds, “[Mexicans] proved all too effectively that neither talent was lacking.”<sup>106</sup> In only a few decades Mexican workers had learned to appreciate both the effectiveness of group interest militancy and how to successfully protest the discrimination as well as inequities that they faced.

The Communist Party played a significant role in propelling and intensifying the effects of Mexican grassroots activism. Their involvement must not be overlooked. Both the American Federation of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World had proved themselves incapable of organizing Mexican laborers. As Daniel states, the A.F.L. lacked will and the I.W.W. a coherent vision. The communists, however, did provide forceful

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<sup>103</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 177.

<sup>104</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1939), 221.

<sup>105</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 177.

<sup>106</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 177.

leadership as they were more than willing to fight against racism and for the economic needs of the jobless and working poor. This leadership, combined with farmworker militancy, increased both the organization and magnitude of these protests.<sup>107</sup>

The significance of Mexican women during the 1930s labor upheavals should not be overlooked either. Through their experiences as workers in fields, canneries, and garment shops, Mexican women added diversity to and fueled the movement towards unionization and political action. Spanish-speaking women provided crucial support during strikes, holding picket lines sometimes for months at a time. Post-strike, women continued the struggle for unemployment relief as members of Unemployed Councils, neighborhood relief committees, and auxiliaries. Mexican women in Los Angeles and other communities participated in relief demonstrations, resisted eviction efforts, dealt with demeaning relief workers, and led the fight for social insurance.<sup>108</sup>

It is unquestionable that Mexican grassroots activism was astounding. Moreover, as this thesis will discuss in its third chapter, it was vital in that it forced the experience of the Mexican working class into the consciousness of intellectuals such as Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, and Dorothea Lange who would, in turn, force this experience into the consciousness of the federal government. However, grassroots activism on its own was not enough to drive serious changes to the grueling situation of Mexicans in the United States. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the ruling ideology rampant throughout American political, economic, and social thought was that the Mexican was an inferior being. When they were wanted in the country, it was because Mexicans were considered docile, easily exploitable and, therefore, profitable. Moreover, even when

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<sup>107</sup> Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 109 and Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 4-5.

<sup>108</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 4.

wanted, the experience of Mexican workers in America was made horrendous through appalling living conditions as well as blatant and systemic racism. Furthermore, the moment it became inconvenient to host Mexican laborers, they were ousted from the country without any regard for basic civil rights. Evidently, a lack of respect for Mexicans existed that would obscure the voices, no matter how determined, of their protests. This is demonstrated by the ultimate dismantling of Mexican working class upheavals through brute force and threats of deportation. Thus, what was necessary to alter the position of Mexicans in the United States was a change in ideology for those in authority; in other words, a change in ideology that would incite progressive federal action as well as legislation. As this thesis will now discuss, this is exactly what McWilliams, Taylor, Lange, and the La Follette Committee offered.

### **Chapter Three: The Solution**

#### ***Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Dorothea Lange, and the La Follette Committee***

In order to offer a complete analysis of the activities of Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Dorothea Lange, and the La Follette Committee, the political environment in which these individuals and committee emerged must be explored. Thus, it is imperative to consider Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, Upton Sinclair's EPIC campaign, and Culbert Olson's efforts to bring the New Deal to California. After the political climate in which McWilliams, Taylor, and Lange arose is explored, this thesis will analyze the personal origins of their rebelliousness as well as consider their significance and influence in the overall struggle to achieve rights for Mexican workers. Last to be discussed is the rise, the promise, and the fall of the La Follette Committee in the context of the struggle for the rights of the Mexican working class.

#### ***A New Deal for America and the Rise of Progressivism in California***

In the fall of 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), the Democratic Party's candidate for president, promised voters a "New Deal" for America. This New Deal, which was FDR's response to the Great Depression, encouraged an unprecedented expansion of federal government programs in order to alleviate the sufferings of the economic crisis.<sup>109</sup> In a campaign speech given at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club, FDR affirmed his belief in a planned economy and, in addition, called for a more equitable distribution of wealth.<sup>110</sup> Just days after FDR took office in the first week of

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<sup>109</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 1.

<sup>110</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 132.

March, 1933, Congress began enacting New Deal legislation and the program became a reality.<sup>111</sup>

In March, 1933 President Roosevelt had redefined the Great Depression as a national emergency which could be countered only if Congress remained united and accepted his legislative proposals. Initially, FDR's immediate aims – to provide economic relief and stimulate recovery – were widely accepted; statistics on unemployment as well as business failures had convinced many Americans that capitalism was in serious crisis.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, in the midst of economic collapse numerous Americans had endured terrible human suffering as well as despair. Harry Fisher, for instance, recounts the destitution he witnessed among industrial workers during the Depression. He states, “It was common to see families evicted from their apartments, their furniture on the sidewalk in front of the slum tenements, and the families standing guard over their few worldly possessions.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, he observed the “crowds of people gathered in front of [agencies] reading the notices for nonexistent jobs that were pasted on the windows.”<sup>114</sup> As a result of such experiences, many Americans began to question the very character of the society in which they lived. Dissent exploded throughout the United States in the form of anti-eviction and anti-foreclosure riots, Communist-led hunger marches, farm strikes, industrial strikes, and so on.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, it is unsurprising that many initially embraced the New Deal. In the midst of a major economic and social crisis, they were overjoyed to hear of the program's

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<sup>111</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Harry Fisher. *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>114</sup> Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War*, 3.

<sup>115</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 2, 200.

liberal commitment to heed their call and make federally-guaranteed economic security a political right for every American citizen. From the moment that FDR took office, he recognized that one of his most pressing needs was to ease the suffering of the at least 30 million Americans living without incomes.<sup>116</sup> As Edsforth writes, “the first New Deal of 1933 saved American capitalism by rescuing banks and property owners, rushing relief to the poor, and imposing risk reduction programs on agriculture, industry, and finance.”<sup>117</sup>

However, as the nation started to show signs of recovery, bitter partisan politics replaced the widespread support that Roosevelt previously enjoyed and subsequently divided the country along ideological and class lines. By mid-1934 widespread business resistance to the New Deal was apparent. During the summer months that preceded the year’s Congressional elections, conservatives attacked the New Deal for promoting budget deficits, wasteful relief programs, labor policies that crippled American businesses, and the regimentation of economic markets. Many conservative spokesmen even accused FDR of harboring dictatorial ambitions. Therefore, the rise of this well-financed and widely publicized conservative opposition to the New Deal shattered any hopes for national unity in regards to the program. By early 1935, the New Deal officially pitted the interests of the urban working class as well as farm families against America’s wealthiest individuals and most powerful corporations. The program had by this point shifted away from the economic stabilization issues that dominated FDR’s first year in office and towards legislation of momentous social justice that historians call the “Second New Deal.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 150.

<sup>117</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 200.

<sup>118</sup> Edsforth. *The New Deal*, 200, 201.

In this climate, a number of progressive politicians participated in social justice movements which promised to actualize the promises of the New Deal. Upton Sinclair's campaign to End Poverty in California (EPIC) and Culbert Olson's efforts to bring the New Deal to California are prime examples.

Long before the gubernatorial election of 1934, Sinclair had been a proponent of Socialism. In 1906, he published *The Jungle*, a novel which revealed the intolerable conditions facing immigrants working in the Chicago meatpacking industry. By the time of his campaign in 1934, he had written approximately fifty books and tracts which criticized the shortcomings of capitalism.<sup>119</sup> Although he was an avid supporter of utopian socialism, Sinclair did believe that its conceptual framework and terminology needed to be purged of its German Marxist orientation. Rather, he believed that it needed to be Americanized if it were to have any chance to appeal to the American people and, subsequently, create what he felt was a more cooperative society.<sup>120</sup> With the emergence of New Deal reforms and legislations, Sinclair wholeheartedly believed that this society could be achieved.

Sinclair's vision of a more cooperative society was represented in his EPIC campaign. EPIC advocated strongly for the national industrial and economic planning that the New Deal proposed. Perhaps the central most feature of the campaign was Sinclair's plea for an economy based on production-for-use. Sinclair urged that the capitalist system, predicated on profit accumulation, had produced itself into a

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<sup>119</sup> Fray M. Blake, and H. Morton Newman. "Upton Sinclair's Epic Campaign." *California History* Vol. 63, No. 4 (1984): 305. Accessed March 19, 2015.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25158250>

<sup>120</sup> Kevin Starr. *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131.

depression. Thus, “productivity was a curse rather than a blessing.”<sup>121</sup> Workers were underpaid and unable to afford what they produced and, consequently, the result was unemployment and poverty as well as idle factories and idle farms. In contrast, Sinclair argued that production-for-use would completely eliminate poverty in the state in less than four years.<sup>122</sup>

Sinclair’s model of an economy based on production-for-use was simple. Agricultural colonies and factory communes, in which the unemployed could live and work, were to be immediately established. These colonies and communes would be state run and the individuals within them would be enabled to produce enough food for consumption as well as would be allowed limited exchange with one another.<sup>123</sup> This, Sinclair argued, was a direct challenge and resolution to the profit system.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to production-for-use, EPIC also advocated progressive tax reform and guaranteed pensions. For example, Sinclair argued that the sales tax be replaced with a graduated income tax rising to 30 percent for incomes over \$50,000. A steeply graduated inheritance tax – 50 percent of all sums above \$50,000 – together with an increased tax on public utility corporations would also be enacted. Furthermore, an amendment to the constitution would abolish all property taxes on owner occupied homes under \$3,000 while taxes would increase at a rate of 1 percent for each \$5,000 of additional valuation on a property assessed at more than \$5,000.<sup>125</sup> What is more, every needy person over the age of sixty and a minimum of three years residence in California would be eligible for a \$50 monthly pension. This same pension would be available to the blind or the disabled

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<sup>121</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 234.

<sup>122</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 234.

<sup>123</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 131.

<sup>124</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 234.

<sup>125</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 131-133.

who could not support themselves and to widowed women and dependent children with a \$25 increment for each child over two. As Kevin Starr states, it is unquestionable that Sinclair sought to permanently restructure the economy of California. In advocating for an egalitarian redistribution of wealth, he sought to further democratize the state.<sup>126</sup>

Although Sinclair did not win the election of 1934, his campaign had a significant impact within California. A numerous and varied range of individuals rushed to support his cause, for in the midst of the Great Depression, Sinclair's campaign offered an alternative to the destitution and suffering wrought by economic collapse. As historian Robert S. McElvaine states, "Sinclair's ideas may, in fact, have been the closest political approximation to the dominant values of Depression America."<sup>127</sup> Sinclair gained the support of select evangelical Protestants, blue collar workers, middle class academics – such as college students and progressive journalists – and even some elites. Evidence of the campaign's tremendous public backing lies in the fact that this was indeed a popular movement operating at the grassroots level. As historians Fray M. Blake and H. Morton Newman state, there were no big money contributions from corporations or individuals. In fact,

Every piece of campaign literature – Sinclair's pamphlet, "I, Governor of California," leaflets, and the weekly newspaper, *Epic News*, edited by Reuben Borough and eventually issued in million-copy editions – were paid for, sold, and distributed by volunteers at meetings, house-parties, churches, and door-to-door visits.<sup>128</sup>

Sinclair himself noted the overall significance of the EPIC campaign within California. He believed that the campaign had helped reverse the proclivity of California

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<sup>126</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 131-133.

<sup>127</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 234.

<sup>128</sup> Blake and Newman. "Upton Sinclair's Epic Campaign," 308.

to reactionary politics.<sup>129</sup> He was not wrong; the EPIC campaign would influence as well as provide inspiration for further liberalism within California. As the California Supreme Court Justice Stanley Mosk stated, Sinclair's EPIC campaign was the "acorn from which evolved the tree of whatever liberalism we have in California."<sup>130</sup> Culbert Olson's effort to bring the New Deal to California is one of the more prominent examples.

In the general election of 1937, the Democratic Party obtained forty-seven out of forty-eight seats in California's senate assembly. One of these seats belonged to Culbert Olson, state senator from Los Angeles County and supporter of EPIC in 1934. In 1938 he was promoted to chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee; a position that allowed him to run for governor. During his campaign, Olson advocated for what he saw as an immediate necessity; and this was that the New Deal be brought to California. Governor Merriam, Sinclair's opponent, was running for re-election; and for the previous four years had upheld George Creel's description of him as "reactionary to the point of medievalism." In numerous labor upheavals that had broken out across the state, he remained a solid and accommodating ally of business elites.<sup>131</sup> Olson, on the other hand, was in favor of New Deal measures such as the public ownership of utilities, slum clearance and housing subsidies, aid for the elderly, a public program of medical insurance, an extension of veterans' benefits, prison reform, small business and consumer advocacy, and protections for labor. Moreover, and perhaps the most shocking, Olson campaigned directly against the Associated Farmers of California – an organization

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<sup>129</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 138.

<sup>130</sup> Blake and Newman. "Upton Sinclair's Epic Campaign," 306.

<sup>131</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 199.

which was created in order to ensure the obstruction of all attempts made by farmworkers to strike and or unionize.<sup>132</sup>

What is important to appreciate about the discussion of California's political environment is that Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Dorothea Lange, and the La Follette Committee emerged during a time in which liberalism was flourishing in California. Therefore, although they were unquestionably radical they were not entirely unique. Rather, they were products of their time and belonged to a larger movement committed to social justice which sought to redress historic inequities, overcome the failures of industrial capitalism, and empower working class Americans.

Now that context has been provided, individual analyses will be provided for the aforementioned individuals and committee. Special focus will be devoted to the motivations and desires for as well as contributions to a liberal California, more specifically, a liberal California that would recognize, appreciate, and fight for the fundamental rights of Mexican laborers.

### ***Carey McWilliams: Political Rebel***

As historian Peter Richardson writes, Carey McWilliams – author, attorney, activist, and editor of *The Nation* from 1955-1975 – “was one of the most versatile, productive, and consequential American public intellectuals of the twentieth century.”<sup>133</sup> Undeniably, McWilliams was a productive writer; he published a dozen books as well as hundreds of essays and articles. Not only do half his books remain in print, but most continue to enjoy the highest of critical praises. Historian Kevin Starr has labeled

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<sup>132</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 139.

<sup>133</sup> Peter Richardson. *American Prophet: The Life and Work of Carey McWilliams*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), vii.

McWilliams as California's most astute political observer as well as "the single finest non-fiction writer on California – ever."<sup>134</sup>

One explanation as to why McWilliams' publications remain useful as well as intriguing is that he probed issues that others could not see or would not explore. In particular, he condemned the exploitation of Mexican American migratory farmworkers in the 1930s. However, in order to grasp the overall importance of McWilliams, it is necessary to mention the other numerous and significant judgments for which he was passionate. For instance, McWilliams helped reverse the unjust murder convictions of Latino youths following their scandalous – and undoubtedly biased – Sleepy Lagoon trials in Los Angeles in the 1940s. He disputed the evacuation and internment of Japanese-American citizens during the Second World War and advocated for federal protections against racial discrimination throughout the 1940s. Furthermore, he openly criticized the Vietnam War, avidly resisted McCarthyism, and helped defend the Hollywood Ten – a group of producers, directors, and screenwriters who appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 and who in response to accusations of communist affiliation advocated their First Amendment rights.<sup>135</sup>

As Richardson notes, most average Americans would eventually come around to McWilliams' positions. Moreover, the Supreme Court would accept his arguments regarding the Japanese-American internment, the federal protections against discrimination, and the Hollywood Ten's First Amendment rights.<sup>136</sup> Yet it was on the subject of Mexican American workers that McWilliams had his most enduring legacy.

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<sup>134</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, vii.

<sup>135</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, ix.

<sup>136</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, ix.

McWilliams was not always considered to be a political rebel. As Greg Critser writes, that story began in the wake of the stock market crash which rendered so many Americans helpless.<sup>137</sup> Thus, before an analysis of McWilliams' political rebellion and contribution to the fight for Mexican American civil liberties can take place, one must consider what motivated McWilliams to even engage in such action. The answer to this question is not obvious; McWilliams, in contrast to Mexican American migrant workers, did not experience day-to-day racial discrimination nor was his world completely upended after the stock market crash of 1929. Rather, as Critser writes, "Ensclosed in his office on the ninth floor of the Spring Arcade Building in downtown Los Angeles, the bespectacled twenty-five-year-old had reason for cheer."<sup>138</sup> Throughout the Great Depression, McWilliams enjoyed employment as a member of a respected law firm. Moreover, he had earned the trust and encouragement of the firm's senior partners and had obtained an increasingly large portion of the firm's courtroom work.

In addition to his work in the legal profession, McWilliams enjoyed literary success. His first book was praised by critics within the pages of literary journals throughout the United States. Moreover, evidence suggests that McWilliams did in fact rejoice in his wealth; he donated funds to a local literary magazine, he danced at jazz clubs during breaks from work, and he lunched with friends at a posh Italian restaurant near his office. Furthermore, as Critser notes, "He even looked healthier; his lanky

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<sup>137</sup> Greg Critser. "The Making of a Cultural Rebel: Carey McWilliams, 1924-1930." *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 55, No. 2 (May 1986): 227. Accessed February 15, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3639530>.

<sup>138</sup> Critser, "The Making of a Cultural Rebel," 227.

school boy features began to flesh out, foreshadowing the fuller, somewhat dumpy appearance of his later years.”<sup>139</sup>

However, McWilliams had begun to develop rebellious sensibilities throughout the 1920s during which time he forged a connection with the bohemian literary scene in Los Angeles and Carmel. Like many of his contemporary bohemian literati – including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Malcolm Cowley – McWilliams had grown alienated from the traditional sources of satisfaction in America. He remained skeptical of the business motif that was encouraged through decades of Republican administrations.<sup>140</sup> For example, in 1928 McWilliams noted privately that he felt “horribly marooned in Los Angeles.” By 1929 he considered the city’s politics “God-awful...not a single colorful or dynamic figure. Not an intelligent liberal on the scene...politics are so abject that they can’t be discussed without blasphemy.”<sup>141</sup> The forces in particular that led McWilliams to question the fundamental quality of the dominant order were the Republican administrations’ emphases on a strict form of white middle class Protestantism – which many saw as the ulterior motive behind prohibition – and on an arid academism which permeated the nation’s leading literary journals.<sup>142</sup>

Critser attributes McWilliams’ sense of disaffection in the 1920s to the First World War. He writes that “the ‘old order’ of his father – one of moral certainties, traditional literary culture, and faith in progress – had been torpedoed by the world war.” In McWilliams’ case in particular, it was the failure of his family’s cattle business that instilled in him skepticism of the idea that individual hard work meant one would

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<sup>139</sup> Critser, “The Making of a Cultural Rebel,” 228.

<sup>140</sup> Critser, “The Making of a Cultural Rebel,” 229.

<sup>141</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, 55.

<sup>142</sup> Critser, “The Making of a Cultural Rebel,” 228.

inevitably achieve the American Dream. Thus, after the war, McWilliams had been released from the old Puritan doctrines of emotional repression, moderation, and Christian humanism that had previously promised success. Consequently, throughout the 1920s McWilliams published a series of works riddled with amused and cynical observations of, in particular, American literature, which he felt exuded such themes.<sup>143</sup>

It was in 1933 that McWilliams' authorial range expanded to include social and political issues. As America became enveloped by the Great Depression and as national problems worsened, McWilliams found his adopted persona of the amused and cynical observer increasingly difficult to maintain. McWilliams witnessed the economic devastation wrought by the Depression and social and political problems began to strike him as more tangible and immediate. In his autobiography, he notes the following,

I had, in fact, a prime view of the ravages of the Depression and its human consequences. I seemed to be endlessly involved with foreclosures and evictions (either bringing them or staving them off), bankruptcies, receiverships, savings-and-loan failures, collapsed business ventures, investigating real estate swindles, tracing lost equities, salvaging something for widows from shrunken estates – the whole range of legal tangles that resulted when the bottom fell out of the Coolidge-Hoover 'boom'.<sup>144</sup>

In the eyes of McWilliams, these hardships rendered his literary interests irrelevant and even frivolous. However, rather than abandoning his interest in literature, McWilliams refocused his literary passion towards illuminating the hardships he witnessed which happened to be felt most intensely within “Shadow America” – a term given to America's large, and largely excluded, immigrant, minority, and working class populations.<sup>145</sup> As historian Daniel Aaron writes, “No longer was it fashionable to scoff at ‘Main Street’;

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<sup>143</sup> Critser, “The Making of a Cultural Rebel,” 229.

<sup>144</sup> Carey McWilliams. *The Education of Carey McWilliams*. (Simon and Schuster, 1979), 66.

<sup>145</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, 60.

now writers were trying to understand it...writers, instead of 'crying for freedom,' were now searching for 'social responsibility.'"<sup>146</sup>

McWilliams' first journalistic piece about immigrants came as a reaction to the program of repatriation discussed in the previous chapter. The article, "Getting Rid of the Mexican," appeared in *American Mercury* in 1933. In it, McWilliams criticized policy makers, social workers, sociologists, "and other subsidized sympathizers" in Los Angeles for enabling this program. For instance, he specifically chastised the sociologists – "the do-gooders" for "[subjecting] the Mexican population to a relentless barrage of surveys, investigations, and clinical conferences."<sup>147</sup> For McWilliams, repatriation and its processes were representative of American society's contempt for the immigrants it relied upon for its prosperity. For instance, he criticized those Los Angeles industrialists who benefited the most from Mexican labor. He chastised them for dehumanizing the Mexican work force and treating them as objects to be deported and brought back when "necessary". He wrote, "The Los Angeles industrialists confidently predict that the Mexican can be lured back 'whenever we need him.'"<sup>148</sup> Moreover, he pointed to the inability – especially of sociologists – to comprehend or sympathize with the effects of repatriation on Mexican children. McWilliams wrote,

A friend of mine who was recently in Mazatlan, found a young Mexican girl on one of the southbound trains crying because she had to leave Belmont High School. Such an abrupt severance of the Americanization program is a contingency that the professors of sociology did not make.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Daniel Aaron. *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 174.

<sup>147</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, 61.

<sup>148</sup> Carey McWilliams. "Getting Rid of the Mexican." *The American Mercury* (March 1933): 324.

<sup>149</sup> McWilliams, "Getting Rid of the Mexican," 324.

McWilliams utilized his authority as an attorney to augment his literary cries for social responsibility towards Mexicans. For instance, he joined the Southern California chapter of the ACLU, one goal of which was to prevent extralegal strikebreaking measures against agricultural workers. McWilliams – as well as many other political, social, and literary activists – came to associate these measures with the ever increasing reports on the rise of European fascism. In a 1940 interview, McWilliams recalled the sentiments he felt during his first labor case assigned to him by the ACLU and in which he had represented several Mexican American workers in a citrus strike in 1934. He firmly stated, “I hadn’t believed stories of such wholesale violation of civil rights until I went down to Orange County to defend a number of farm workers held in jail for ‘conspiracy’. When I announced my purpose, the judge said, ‘It’s no use; I’ll find them guilty anyway.’”<sup>150</sup> Thus, the realization dawned on McWilliams that Mexican, as well as other minority workers, did not enjoy equality before the law.

McWilliams’ interest in the position held by Mexicans within American society ran high throughout the 1930s and a particular theme began to appear again and again throughout his works. He consistently argued that the attempted Americanization of minorities within the U.S. was not only impossible, but degrading and demeaning. Moreover, he asserted that business tactics which exploited a Mexican worker’s impermanent status within the American economy were not only wrong, but unethical.<sup>151</sup>

Evidence exists to suggest that Mexican grassroots activism solidified McWilliams’ convictions. In the article “The Farmers Get Tough”, McWilliams acknowledges the struggle of laborers against the aggressive forces determined to

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<sup>150</sup> Richardson, *American Prophet*, 60.

<sup>151</sup> Critser, “The Political Rebellion of Carey McWilliams,” 44.

maintain their subordination. Observing a strike in the Imperial Valley which was dominated by Mexicans, McWilliams noted, “The most striking illustration of farmer-Fascism in California has been the revolt in the Imperial Valley. For the Imperial Valley farmers have not protested: they have ‘revolted,’ in the Fascist sense.”<sup>152</sup> McWilliams continues in the article to criticize the authority and power that California growers had obtained over the years and now held over farm workers. He writes,

The old-fashioned farmer has been supplanted by a type to which the term can no longer be applied with accuracy. The new farmer is a grower. He is only semi-rural. Often he regards his farm as a business and has it incorporated. He belongs to a number of wealthy produce exchanges; he is the director of several “protective associations.” Moreover, he has a hand in state politics. He employs a bookkeeper, and, in sober truth, he looks rather like a banker. He dabbles in publicity and has learned the trick of mob-baiting. He will never be an ally of labor.<sup>153</sup>

Thus, for McWilliams, Mexican activism in the Imperial Valley exposed the industrialization of agricultural labor. Moreover, he advocated the necessity of grassroots activism in protesting against business minded and profit oriented employers. In stating that such employers would never be an ally of labor, McWilliams implied that engaging in collective protest was the only means by which laborers could force the hand of an otherwise dominant and hostile authority.

Perhaps the most influential work that McWilliams published that augmented the struggle for the rights of Mexican farmworkers during the 1930s was his book *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migrant Farm Labor in California* which appeared in 1939. In this work, McWilliams demonstrates that Mexican laborers belonged to a larger multiracial, minority dominated, and migratory workforce that was changing the very character of the American working class. As with “The Farmers Get Tough”, *Factories in*

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<sup>152</sup> Carey McWilliams. “The Farmers Get Tough.” *The American Mercury* (1934): 241.

<sup>153</sup> Carey McWilliams, “The Farmers Get Tough,” 245.

*the Field* argued that the overarching problem facing said laborers was the overbearing power structure otherwise known as the California Fruit Growers Exchange. In addition to protesting against industrial agriculture, *Factories in the Field* advocated a revolutionary response to it. McWilliams writes,

Today some 200,000 migratory workers, trapped in the State, eke out a miserable existence, intimidated by their employers, homeless, starving, destitute. Today they are restless but quiet; tomorrow they may be rebellious. Before these workers can achieve a solution of the problems facing them, they will have to work a revolution in California landownership and in the methods of agricultural operations which now prevail.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, the conclusion of *Factories in the Field* is in the form of a recommendation. McWilliams argues that a complete overhaul of the agricultural system within California is necessary. He states that the “real solution involves the substitution of collective agriculture for the present monopolistically owned and controlled system.” Moreover, “...the final solution will come only when the present wasteful, vicious, undemocratic, and thoroughly antisocial system of agriculture ownership in California is abolished.”<sup>155</sup>

*Factories in the Field* must also be acknowledged for its specific and direct involvement in the protest for the rights of Mexican farm laborers. For instance, within the work McWilliams asserts that by 1930 Mexicans were “unquestionably the largest single element in the 200,000 agricultural laborers in the state.”<sup>156</sup> Moreover, he publicized and made accessible to the public and government officials alike the explanation for this, such as the feasibility of exploitation and subjugation enjoyed by employers which was outlined in the previous chapter. He asserts that this predominantly Mexican labor force was ideal to growers for the sole reason that it was easily

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<sup>154</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 9-10.

<sup>155</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 324-325.

<sup>156</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 125.

exploitable. He emphasizes the expendability of Mexican laborers by quoting a ranch foreman who, speaking to a Mexican, stated: “When we want you, we’ll call you; when we don’t – git.”<sup>157</sup> McWilliams’ choice of language in describing such attitudes and actions made clear his contempt for such treatment. For example, he states that “the Mexican...was used for a purpose, and, when other developments intervened...[the Mexican] was discarded.”<sup>158</sup>

Furthermore, in *Factories in the Field*, McWilliams publicized the magnitude of Mexican American labor upheavals and applauded their ability to organize. In highlighting their struggle, he helped to dismantle the myth that Mexicans were lazy and worthless peons who could, without resistance, be exploited as well as systematically subjugated. Moreover, McWilliams described the horrific and inhumane treatment that Mexican strikers succumbed to at the hands of growers and strikebreakers. Of a strike in the Imperial Valley which occurred in 1934, McWilliams writes,

When the strikers persisted, a force recruited from the Sheriff’s Office, the local Police, the State Highway Policy and vigilantes obtained in the towns...raided the desert camp of the strikers. The shacks in which the workers were living were burned to the ground, and the workers driven out with tear-gas bombs. Over 2000 men, women, and children were forcibly evicted from the camp, and the arrests continued. A baby in the camp died as a result of the bombing.<sup>159</sup>

Thus, McWilliams humanized Mexican laborers and displayed them as individuals whose inalienable rights were unduly violated by a larger arbitrary power. Moreover, he demonstrated the strength inherent in Mexican Americans by demonstrating their ability to rise up and protest such a concentrated power to the extent that they did. Thus, in

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<sup>157</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 126.

<sup>158</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 130.

<sup>159</sup> McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 224-225.

writing *Factories in the Field*, McWilliams urged readers to see Mexicans as individual and strong human beings.

***Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange: The Dynamic Duo***

As with McWilliams, Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange made significant contributions towards the effort to realize the destitution facing migrant workers within the United States. In regards to Mexican labor, Taylor's efforts were pivotal in the struggle to publicize the injustices facing the Mexican working class. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Taylor undertook one of the first academic surveys of Mexican life and labor within the United States. This resulted in the publication of his eleven volume series entitled *Mexican Labor in the United States*. In preparation for this series, Taylor conducted thousands of interviews with labor contractors, businessmen, farmers, local school and government officials as well as laborers themselves in areas throughout the nation. Moreover, he collected *corridos*, Mexican storytelling ballads that often contained social commentaries. It was this ethnographic and sociological approach taken by Taylor that increased the quality and depth of his research. As Kara D. Schultz writes, "His use of scientific rhetoric, his largely absent narrative voice, and his accumulation of empirical and statistical data set his work apart from the slim extant research on Mexican communities in the United States."<sup>160</sup>

It is important to note that Taylor's inclusion of Mexican labor across the entirety of the nation did not fail to emphasize the large concentration of Mexicans within

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<sup>160</sup> Kara D Schultz. "Progressive Scientism: Paul Shuster Taylor and the Making of Mexican Labor in the United States." (Master's Thesis. Graduate School of Vanderbilt University, 2012), 4. and  
Linda Gordon. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009), 144.

California. Taylor devoted one-fifth of *Mexican Labor in the United States* to the abundance of Mexican workers found in the Imperial Valley. The other four regions included Dimmit County, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and South Platte Valley, Colorado.<sup>161</sup>

It is also important to understand that although Taylor's methodology within *Mexican Labor in the United States* was empirical and scientific in nature, he remained encouraged and motivated by progressive intentions. As Schultz writes, "Taylor's understanding of urban and rural labor was guided by Populist and Progressive assumptions that idealized the small farmer and, as such, viewed the agricultural structure of the Southwest with disdain."<sup>162</sup> Taylor developed such assumptions during his childhood. He grew up in a small city in Iowa, but experienced farm life working on his uncle's farm of 120 acres. On this farm he experienced community warmth and egalitarian relations with the help who, quite often, joined the family for dinner. Thus, – as Gordon states – instilled within Taylor was a "romantic view of family farming that would shape his research and politics."<sup>163</sup>

Taylor's progressive upbringing was reinforced at the University of Wisconsin which he entered in 1913. There, he studied economics under John R. Commons and Richard T. Ely, famous progressive scholars who rejected the leading ideology which encouraged the idea that markets were a natural phenomenon. Instead, they viewed them as arrangements constructed and managed by man-made institutions, for example, governments. This thinking challenged neoclassical economics which suggested that

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<sup>161</sup> Schultz, "Progressive Scientism," 4.

<sup>162</sup> Schultz, "Progressive Scientism," 4.

<sup>163</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 141.

individuals – motivated by self-interest – were the masters of economic decision making and their own economic destiny.<sup>164</sup>

Because Taylor harbored progressive convictions, he did not hesitate to include moral judgments within his conclusions. He in no way felt that the integrity of empirical research required him to assume a disinterested perspective. Rather, he felt that the point of his research was to encourage the amelioration of any disparities that he discovered. Thus, he soon became an advocate for social justice campaigns. For instance, during his research for *Mexican Labor in the United States*, Taylor learned that California's racial segregation could be as extreme as Mississippi's; he concluded that individual labor was devalued insofar as Mexican laborers were unjustly prevented from eventual land ownership. He therefore advocated the necessity of reform in regards to this problem.<sup>165</sup>

Mexican grassroots activism undoubtedly had an impact on Taylor and fueled his efforts to publicize as well as afford justice to Mexican migrant workers. In 1933, for instance, Taylor along with his graduate student and friend Clark Kerr – future president of the University of California and opponent of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley University – investigated the cotton strike that took place in the San Joaquin Valley. He wrote, “As the faulting of the earth exposes its strata and reveals its structure, so a social disturbance throws into bold relief the structure of society...”<sup>166</sup> Thus, for Taylor, the protests of the farmworkers and their attempts to earn a decent living revealed that the structure of American society was designed to work against them.

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<sup>164</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 141-142.

<sup>165</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 144-145. and Schultz, “Progressive Scientism,” 4.

<sup>166</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 151.

Taylor's efforts to publicize the plight of Mexican American migrant workers – as well as migrant workers of other ethnicities – were intensified in 1934 when he met Dorothea Lange. The two, extremely influenced by the New Deal, shared a desire to become part of a larger movement for social justice. For Taylor, his longing for social justice had grown steadily over the course of the decade marked by his work on Mexican migrant workers. For Lange, this longing arose out of the nation's great economic crisis. It was this camaraderie and this commonality of purpose that would eventually ignite and fuel personal chemistry between the two.<sup>167</sup>

However, Lange was important to Taylor not only on a personal level, but also as a contributor to his studies on migrant labor during the Great Depression. Lange added certain flair to Taylor's work that empirical methods sometimes lack. To his data and statistics she contributed documentary photography. As Linda Gordon states, "Paul taught Dorothea how to think critically and systematically about society, economy, and environment. Dorothea taught Paul to see more acutely the human emotional and aesthetic experience of the political economy he studied."<sup>168</sup>

Taylor was critical of the New Deal's failure to improve the predicament of agricultural workers. In his view, the rural Depression was deeper, more extensive, and more protracted than the urban. For instance, during his campaign, Roosevelt had promised the powerful American Farm Bureau Federation – dominated by large-scale growers – that deflated farm prices would raise. Four days after his inauguration, Roosevelt's bill was introduced and two months later it became law. In essence, farm owners were paid to remove land from cultivation. In this way, scarcity would raise

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<sup>167</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 55.

<sup>168</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 140.

prices. Moreover, farmworkers would benefit as the payments for crop production were to be shared with tenants, who, in the Southwest, constituted 75 percent of all farmers.<sup>169</sup> In practice however, most owners refused to share funds. This is due to the fact that the program of acreage reduction remained voluntary; farmers were induced, not coerced, to meet the requirements of Roosevelt's bill.<sup>170</sup> As historian Louis Hacker commented in 1934, "The Administration's program for recovery in agriculture, by means of voluntary acreage reduction, began to meet with insuperable obstacles almost from the very start."<sup>171</sup> For instance, rather than reducing production, many owners took government payments for not planting their poorest land and actually increased production by discharging and evicting surplus tenants whilst proceeding to cultivate their better acres more intensively.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, owners used payments to buy tractors which, consequently, displaced even more tenants.<sup>173</sup>

Thus, in early 1935, Taylor was determined to realize the full potential of New Deal legislation within the Southwest. He became a leading advocate for farmworkers and subsequently formed a team that would travel throughout the Southwestern United States in an effort to investigate and publicize the conditions confronting migrant workers. His staff included one of his graduate students, Tom Vasey; a former University of Wisconsin classmate, Irving Wood; a former banker functioning as an "employer representative"; Edward Rowell, nephew of a university regent and editor of the *San*

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<sup>169</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 158

<sup>170</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 149.

<sup>171</sup> Louis M. Hacker. *A Short History of the New Deal*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1934), 93.

<sup>172</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 149-150.

<sup>173</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 158

*Francisco Chronicle*; a Mexican American woman to do interviews in Spanish; and Lange.<sup>174</sup>

These investigations ultimately resulted in – and are most famously known for – their contributions to Taylor and Lange’s work entitled *An American Exodus*. However, because the infamous Dust Bowl – a period of dust storms which swept across the United States during the 1930s - took place during their investigations, the flood of migration of white migrant workers that ensued from Oklahoma to California largely dominates the work. Before the Dust Bowl occurred, however, Mexican laborers remained the primary focus of Taylor and Lange and the pair made significant strides towards broadcasting their predicament as well as making it known to the federal government.

Between March and August 1935, Lange and Taylor produced five phototextual reports which they hoped would convince Roosevelt of the immediate need to aid Mexican migrant workers. Taylor and Lange documented the deplorable living conditions facing workers and advocated the necessity of better hygiene, health care, education, and nutrition. They emphasized the lack of shelter, bedding, stoves, medical supplies, plumbing, fresh water, fruits and vegetables, and so on. Moreover, they highlighted high mortality rates – especially for infants – and the presence of dysentery, hookworm, typhoid, and scarlet fever that wreaked havoc throughout the camps. In reading these reports it is unquestionable that Taylor and Lange played a significant role in informing the federal government of the destitution that characterized the lives of Mexican migrant workers.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 159.

<sup>175</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, 162.

### *The Rise, the Promise, and the Fall of the La Follette Committee*

As Jerold Auerbach states, “Between 1936 and 1940 a Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor – more commonly known as the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee – conducted the most extensive investigation of civil liberties infractions ever undertaken by a congressional committee.”<sup>176</sup> Its purpose, as stated by the Committee, was to “investigate violations of the right of free speech and assembly and interference with the right of labor to organize and bargain collectively.”<sup>177</sup>

Robert Marion La Follette Jr., a Wisconsin Republican, was appointed by Senator Elbert Thomas of Utah to chair the Committee. As Senator, La Follette had surrounded himself with left-liberal staff members and advisers and he continued this tradition as chairman of the La Follette Committee. His team, formed of like-minded attorneys, investigators, researchers, and writer-editors, would become one of the most dedicated and effective governmental teams in New Deal Washington.<sup>178</sup>

Although the Committee initially concerned itself with industrial violations of the Northeast, staff members of the Committee – between 1936 and 1938 – did engage in preliminary investigations in California on behalf of the National Labor Relations Board. These investigations revealed that civil and labor rights were undoubtedly being suppressed in California to an unprecedented degree.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 1.

<sup>177</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor. *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor Report of the Committee of Education and Labor Pursuant to S. Res 266 A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*. Part 55-60. Washington D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1940. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000953623>. Front Page.

<sup>178</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 266.

<sup>179</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 267.

However, this alone did not bring the Committee's full and extensive investigations to California. The National Labor Relations Board had been established to function as both arbiter and enforcer of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. However, while this Act guaranteed the rights of industrial labor to organize into unions and to bargain collectively with management, agricultural and domestic labor were excluded from such protections.<sup>180</sup> Thus, herein lays the overall significance of those efforts put forth by the individuals previously discussed in this chapter. For instance, Taylor utilized his status as an advocate for the rights of migrant workers and his friendship with Senator La Follette to urge the necessity of a full scale investigation into the rights of free speech and labor in California. Taylor argued that the state was an industrial battlefield and was America's most dramatic arena of labor conflict and class antagonism. McWilliams also utilized his status as a proponent for the rights of farmworkers to encourage extensive Committee investigations within California. In early 1939 McWilliams joined the Olson administration as commissioner of Housing and Immigration. With this title, he was able to exercise significant authority as well as influence as the top state official responsible for the welfare of migrants.<sup>181</sup>

La Follette was unquestionably convinced of the necessity to bring the Committee's investigations to California; however, he lacked the necessary budget to do so. His ability to eventually secure such a budget attests further to the significance and influence of Taylor and McWilliams. While their pleas had undoubtedly encouraged La Follette, the publications of *Factories in the Field* and *An American Exodus* had convinced California's government officials of the necessity to provide funds as well as

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<sup>180</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 266.

<sup>181</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 263-4, 267.

focus its investigation on impediments to farm labor organization.<sup>182</sup> Thus, in 1939, the newly elected Senator from California, Sheridan Downey, helped secure an additional appropriation of \$50,000 to bring the La Follette Committee to California.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, it is significant that both Taylor and McWilliams would continue to play an active role throughout the hearings. Taylor appeared as the lead witness in the San Francisco hearings and both Taylor and McWilliams served as active consultants for the duration of the Committee.

Thus, in late 1939 the La Follette Committee opened offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco. It consisted of a thirty-five person staff and was headed by Henry Fowler who, as Starr states, “was a brilliant young lawyer whom La Follette had recruited from the Tennessee Valley Authority.” The Committee held hearings in these cities over twenty-eight days extending from December 1939 to January 1940. Starr provides a wealth of statistics that attest to the extent and depth of the hearings. He states, “The Committee issued more than 500 subpoenas, heard 395 witnesses, compiled 2,451 pages of printed testimony, and assembled 1,747 exhibits for entry at the time of testimony, followed by 5,875 supplementary exhibits.”<sup>184</sup>

Not only did the La Follette Committee investigate violations of free speech and rights of labor within California, but it assembled a history of agriculture and farm labor within the state that revealed California’s history of disenfranchisement, exploitation, and repression. This strengthened the final conclusion drawn by the Committee that what existed in California in the 1930s was nothing less than a conspiracy to suppress constitutional rights. For example, littered throughout the Committee’s reports are

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<sup>182</sup> Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 180.

<sup>183</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 267.

<sup>184</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 267.

testimonies that not only advocate the reform of Californian agriculture, but frequently compare California to a fascist dictatorship within Europe. R.L. Burgess, regional representative of the Division of Information of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, stated the following:

My feeling is that the Associated Farmers are definitely moving toward a Fascist concept of how agriculture should be run. They want to preserve the legal rights of large property interests as opposed to the human rights of the majority of people connected with agriculture...Agriculture in California cannot continue to succeed unless the thousands of persons who do actual labor have a contented and secure feeling.<sup>185</sup>

The significance of this statement is unprecedented. It demonstrates that the La Follette Committee as well as Californian officials such as Burgess equated the discussion of labor rights with the human rights of those connected with agriculture – which in California by this time was obviously dominated by Mexicans, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. Thus, in advocating that agricultural laborers must feel content and secure, Burgess was advocating the need to recognize the inalienable rights of Mexican laborers.

Although the overall conclusions drawn by the Committee were in fact made in regards to all farmworkers throughout the Southwest, this does not take away from the Committee's specific impact on Mexican Americans. Evidence within the Committee's reports exists to validate the unbelievable change in attitudes of Anglo-Americans in authority specifically towards laborers of Mexican descent. For example, within his testimony to the Committee, Pelham David Glassford – General Manager of Glassford Farms – argued against the justifications for the exploitation of Mexican laborers and advocated for the improvement of their living conditions. In the Committee's reports, he

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<sup>185</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor...part 55-60. 21809.

states the following: “It may be true that alien Mexicans receive higher wages and live better in Imperial Valley than they do in their own country, but this cannot constitute an excuse for countenancing poverty and squalor in the United States.”<sup>186</sup> The significance of such a statement, especially from an Anglo business elite, is unprecedented. This demonstrates that the unrelenting activities not only of the Committee, but also of McWilliams, Taylor, Lange, and Mexican laborers were having an impact on those in society who most benefitted from the subjugation of the Mexican working class. In effect, such a statement clearly shows that a change in values – no matter how embedded within American society – is made possible through collective action and cross-class as well as cross-ethnic alliances.

In addition to business elites such as Glassford, government officials were now also taking seriously the human rights violations of those of Mexican descent. For instance, Senator Thomas, during a hearing, was eager to hear McWilliams’ complaints of Mexican discrimination within California. McWilliams spoke of the prejudice against Mexicans within the public school system, recreation centers, public parks, and so on. When he stated that he had reports of evidence for such statements prepared, Senator Thomas replied that the Committee would “be glad to have them.”<sup>187</sup>

The eventual dismantling of the Committee was carried out by the political right who despised New Deal reforms and valued large business interests over the laboring classes.<sup>188</sup> In order to discredit the Committee, such opposition charged that the La Follette Committee’s origins, composition, and direction reflected an affinity for

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<sup>186</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor...part 55-60. 20138.

<sup>187</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor...part 55-60. 21777.

<sup>188</sup> Jerold S Auerbach. “The La Follette Committee: Labor and Civil Liberties in the New Deal.” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 51, No. 3 (1964): 450-454. Accessed March 19, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1894895> .

communism. For example, at the outset of the Committees investigations, John P. Frey, president of the Metal Trades Department of the American Federation of Labor, accumulated several files filled with accusations of conspiratorial behavior. Consequently, his testimony opened the floor to others who harbored grievances against the Committee. Thus, by the time the La Follette Committee presented a bill to the Senate, approval was unlikely; and ultimately, their efforts to aid American workers were crushed.<sup>189</sup>

### ***Conclusion and the Contemporary Mexican American Experience***

The conclusions of the La Follette Committee did in fact impact a variety of migrant workers of numerous ethnicities. However, its contributions to Mexican migrant workers hold a special significance. As chapter two has demonstrated, Mexican migrant laborers constituted the largest minority within California and occupied the lowest position within the state's social, political, and economic hierarchy. Mexican workers were systematically excluded from social mobility as a result of prejudice and shocking exploitation. Thus, the significance of the La Follette Committee in regards to Mexican laborers is as follows: for the first time ever in American history, the fundamental rights of Mexicans were discussed among United States government officials. Not only were they discussed but they were defended in a congressional investigation. The significance of this is unprecedented and must be realized. Less than a decade prior to this, Mexicans – whether legal citizens or not – had endured forced deportations, harassment, deplorable living conditions, rampant segregation measures, exploitative working conditions, and so on. Now, the La Follette Committee reports contained statements such as the following:

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<sup>189</sup> Auerbach, "The La Follette Committee," 450-454.

“...the period of the peonage is over, and the agricultural workers, no matter whether they are white or black, American or Mexican, must receive a decent living wage as well as sanitary conditions in camps or where they have to work.”<sup>190</sup> The La Follette Committee’s overwhelming scarcity within historiography implies that the contributions of the Committee were insignificant. However, this is simply not the case. Although the right did eventually succeed in dismantling the Committee as well as its resolutions, its contents and the fact that it existed demonstrates that a change in attitude towards minority workers, in particular Mexican Americans, had taken place within American society. No actions taken by the right could erase the change that had happened in the minds of certain American people as well as officials.

This thesis has also demonstrated the necessity to take into account the coalition between Mexican grassroots activism and radical middle-class intellectuals in the story of the La Follette Committee as it relates to Mexican labor. In a demonstration of brilliant organizing and a refusal to accept their destitute position within society, Mexican laborers publicized their situation and demanded that their rights be recognized. McWilliams, Taylor, and Lange – already radicalized – took inspiration from said demonstrations and elevated them to such a height that the federal government deemed them worthy of investigating. Thus, their efforts were crucial and deserve recognition.

The findings of this thesis are invaluable within a discussion of the contemporary Mexican American experience. As historian Robert S. McElvaine states, “perhaps more important than the continuing effects of the things the New Deal did is the impact on us today of what it failed to do – or did insufficiently or incorrectly.”<sup>191</sup> Currently, Hispanics

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<sup>190</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor...part 55-60. 21800.

<sup>191</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, xxii.

constitute the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States. Moreover, after English, Spanish remains the most spoken language at home in forty-four states as well as the District of Columbia.<sup>192</sup> Despite this, Mexican Americans are still confronted with overwhelming discrimination. National estimates state that thirty percent of Mexican American adults experience daily unfair treatment due to their ethnicity. Estimates reached fifty percent for eighteen to twenty-four year olds, which was the youngest age group studied.<sup>193</sup> These recent approximations devastate historian Matt Meier's hope that mounting racism against Mexican Americans towards the end of the 1980s was a transient reaction to the issue of rising Mexican immigration.<sup>194</sup>

According to Tomás Jiménez, nativist sentiment aimed at immigrants remains the reason for discrimination against Mexican Americans today. Foreign born Mexicans, he states, are the primary targets of a prominent anti-immigrant antipathy which is voiced in both interpersonal settings and public forums in the U.S. Thus, Mexican Americans are mistaken for foreigners and, consequently, are labelled as "illegals" and "aliens"; they are viewed with skepticism based on their skin color and or ethnic surnames.<sup>195</sup>

For contemporary Mexican Americans, discrimination transcends multiple pathways; four of the more prominent avenues include occupational, academic,

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<sup>192</sup> Rebecca S. Borden. "The English Only Movement: Revisiting Cultural Hegemony." *Multicultural Perspectives* Vol. 16, No. 4 (October 2014): 231. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1080/15210960.2014.956607.

<sup>193</sup> Cady Berkel et al. "Discrimination and Adjustment for Mexican American Adolescents: A Prospective Examination of the Benefits of Culturally Related Values." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 2010): 894. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1111/j.15327795.2010.00668.x.

<sup>194</sup> Matt S. Meier. "Afterword." In *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States*, by Carey McWilliams, edited by Matt S. Meier. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 333.

<sup>195</sup> Tomás R. Jiménez, "Mexican Immigrant Replenishment and the Continuing Significance of Ethnicity and Race." *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 113, No. 6 (May 2008): 1530, 1558. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1086/587151.

immigration, and health care domains. Studies conducted in the 1990s revealed that Mexican American incomes in the occupational sphere were far below those of non-Hispanic whites;<sup>196</sup> according to Meier, there was no effort by government or business officials to narrow this gap.

In fact, for the previous decade it had been steadily increasing as more and more Mexican American families have found themselves below the poverty level.<sup>197</sup> In 1990, Edward Telles and Edward Murguia found that financial divisions were the direct result of phenotypic discrimination in the labor market. They concluded their study by advocating for the enforcement of equal employment provisions that would prohibit discrimination based both on national origin and color.<sup>198</sup> However, as Roberto Villegas-Gold and Hyung Choiyoo demonstrate, these provisions still have yet to be accounted for today. Contemporary Mexican Americans remain confronted by workplace discrimination as well as exploitation and find themselves working long hours in hazardous occupational environments.<sup>199</sup>

Mexican American disadvantages in the occupational domain are directly correlated with the marginalization they face as adolescents in the academic sphere. Despite Mexican American emphasis on the value of school as an important pathway to success, their dropout rate is four times that of whites and twice that of African-American

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<sup>196</sup> Edward E. Telles, and Edward Murguia. "Phenotypic Discrimination and Income Differences among Mexican Americans." *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 71, No. 4 (December 1990): 682. Accessed October 27, 2014. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=dfe01c7b-4da0-4667-b81d3514dcf16652%40sessionmgr4004&vid=9&hid=4104>.

<sup>197</sup> Matt S. Meier, "Afterword," 333.

<sup>198</sup> Telles and Murguia, "Phenotypic Discrimination and Income Differences," 694.

<sup>199</sup> Roberto Villegas-Gold, and Yoo Hyung Choi. "Coping With Discrimination Among Mexican American College Students." *Journal Of Counseling Psychology* Vol. 61, No. 3 (July 2014): 404. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1037/a0036591.

students.<sup>200</sup> National data reveals that in states such as Michigan, South Dakota, West Virginia, Alabama, Connecticut, South Carolina, Nevada, and Ohio, nearly sixty percent of Hispanic students drop out of high school.<sup>201</sup> Literature suggests that poor academic persistence and performance among Mexican Americans is due largely to experiences of discrimination based on class and ethnicity. This discrimination is endured particularly within the confines of student teacher relationships and is commonly reported by adolescents.<sup>202</sup> In addition, those students who do graduate and continue on to higher education are met with continued obstacles. Villegas-Gold and Choiyoo state that there is evidence to suggest the rise of discrimination on college campuses.<sup>203</sup>

Since the 1980s, the growth of the English Only Movement has augmented the rise in drop-out rates among Mexican American students. This movement, which continues to infiltrate U.S. educational policy, speaks to a shrill nativism and holds that the English language symbolizes a unifying and national identity within the United States. Consequently, linguistic and ethnic groups are marginalized. For example, English Only initiatives have succeeded in forcing English language instruction in schools in both Arizona and California, two states that hold some of the largest Mexican American populations in the U.S. As stated so eloquently by Rebecca Borden, this ideology “perpetuates and sustains linguistic, cultural, and racial discrimination by ignoring the linguistic and cultural diversity of the students in schools today.” Furthermore, it

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<sup>200</sup> Susan Stone, and Meekyung Han. “Perceived school environments, perceived discrimination, and school performance among children of Mexican immigrants.” *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2005): 55. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.08.011.

<sup>201</sup> Borden, “The English Only Movement: Revisiting Cultural Hegemony,” 229.

<sup>202</sup> Stone and Han. “Perceived school environments,” 55.

<sup>203</sup> Villegas-Gold and Choi. “Coping With Discrimination,” 404.

“eliminates cultural and linguistic diversity by creating a homogeneous society that continues to subscribe to the dominant cultural values.”<sup>204</sup>

Mexican Americans have also been subjected to widespread discrimination vis-à-vis immigration legislation. In 2006, more than a million immigrants in the U.S. – the majority being those of Mexican descent – marched in protest of the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437). This bill was introduced in the House of Representatives and sought to criminalize unauthorized immigrants as well as any individuals who helped them enter or remain in the U.S. Such a bill flourished in response to the post-9/11 hysteria of 2001. As sociologist Sharon Quinsaat states, “...anxieties over terrorists penetrating the porous U.S.–Mexico border compelled legislators to approach immigration using the framework of homeland security.”<sup>205</sup> Critics of (H.R. 4437) accused the bill not only of being ineffective, but also constitutionally questionable and unnecessarily draconian. It portrayed immigrants – as well as Mexican American citizens who, as stated above, were often equated with this group – as dangerous, antagonistic, and unwanted. As Quinsaat states, it conjured images of the United States as “under threat from undocumented immigrants, invaders, and criminals, whose intent is to do harm to the ‘native’ population.”<sup>206</sup> Thus, and as those who protested the bill argued further, not only did it encourage xenophobic perceptions of Mexicans within and outside the United States, but it failed to recognize the individual

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<sup>204</sup> Borden, “The English Only Movement: Revisiting Cultural Hegemony,” 229.

<sup>205</sup> Sharon Quinsaat. “Competing News Frames and Hegemonic Discourses in the Construction of Contemporary Immigration and Immigrants in the United States.” *Mass Communication and Society* Vol. 17, No.4 (March 2014): 576. Accessed October 27, 2014. doi: 10.1080/15205436.2013.816742

<sup>206</sup> Sharon Quinsaat, “Competing News Frames,” 587.

identities, struggles, and journeys of tired and poor immigrants in need of refuge and help.

Lastly, Mexican American discrimination is increasingly prominent within the realm of health care. For example, studies show that due to the discrimination experienced in the academic sphere, Mexican American adolescents are at an elevated risk for a variety of health problems. In particular, adolescents display higher levels of depressive symptoms as well as externalizing behaviors.<sup>207</sup> This increase in issues regarding mental health not only impacts contemporary Mexican American youth, but will continue to have an effect on their as well as their children's futures. Furthermore, as stated by Villegas-Gold and Choiyoo, Mexican Americans are often denied treatment in health care settings due to their ethnicity and are increasingly subjected to culturally insensitive medical service.<sup>208</sup>

As in the late 1920s and the 1930s, Mexican Americans remain in a troubling situation within the United States today. While their experience may seem fixed, this investigation demonstrates the power of collective organizing, multi-racial as well as multi-class alliances, and progressive governmental power. If one wished to ameliorate the conditions facing contemporary Mexican Americans, they would be wise to look to the historical example that Mexican American grassroots activism, McWilliams, Taylor, Lange, and the La Follette Committee provide.

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<sup>207</sup> Berkel et al. "Discrimination and Adjustment for Mexican American Adolescents," 893.

<sup>208</sup> Villegas-Gold and Choi. "Coping With Discrimination," 404.

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