Dark Sweat, White Gold

California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal

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CHAPTER TWO

Sin Fronteras

Mexican Workers

Migrant agricultural workers are often pictured as historical nonentities, helpless victims of a rapacious system, who lack the roots that nurture families and friendships and form the basis for social and political organization. Certainly the agricultural labor system shaped the parameters within which Mexicans lived and worked, and it was indeed an unstable and chaotic labor system, which paid them little, disrupted their lives, and demanded endurance and imagination to survive. As part of the cheap labor pool, Mexican migrant workers were easily exploited. Most were not United States citizens, and the estimated 80 percent who crossed the border without documents not only lacked political rights but lived under the threat of deportation. The lack of formal power increased their vulnerability to exploitation. And racism helped isolate them from other workers and both intensified and justified their exploitation in the fields and the surrounding society.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, 75 percent of the cotton work force were Mexicans: on larger ranches they constituted 90 percent or more. Mexicans adapted to some of the seemingly insatiable demands of the agricultural industry and resisted others. In the process, they helped form patterns of work and shaped their own lives within the chaos of the labor system. They attempted to stabilize their lives, to form and maintain families, to raise their children, and to establish the social networks and communities that would permit them to help themselves and each other. To understand the interplay of class relations in cotton requires an examination of the lives of Mexican workers. In part the stability they

sought came from the structural changes in the cotton industry, as the nature of cotton work in the temporal window of the 1920s laid the basis for more regular patterns of migration, living, and work. Yet other sources of stability that outlasted the relatively prosperous years of the 1920s had deeper roots, in their own experiences as workers and Mexicans and in their families, networks, and communities.

THE MEXICAN BACKGROUND

The Mexicans who picked cotton in the 1920s and 1930s were veterans of the upheavals of the expansion of industrial and agricultural capitalism both on haciendas and in the mines, fields, and industries of Mexico and the United States. The majority came originally from Mexico, but it was a Mexico in which the transformation to a capitalist economy, well underway by the 1890s, had become an essential part of their work, lives, and migrations. It had shaped them as individuals, workers, and members of their families and communities. It had, in essence, shaped the culture of Mexican cotton workers. Although they were stereotyped as passive and malleable agrarians, many had in fact joined rural uprisings, labor unions, and armed forces of the Mexican Revolution. In the process they had adapted, through their families and social networks, to cushion the blows of dislocation and migration. The memories of these experiences, and the means they had adopted to survive, they brought with them to the cotton fields of California.

To understand this, we need to trace the origins of Mexican workers in cotton. Although the lack of records makes this difficult, we can make some generalizations. According to Francisco Palomares of the Agricultural Labor Bureau, by 1926 the majority of Mexicans who picked cotton had come originally from Mexico. This coincides with national figures which reported that, by 1930, 64 percent of the Mexicans then in the United States had immigrated since 1915, and 94 percent of the population had been here only since 1900. California had received what a 1930 report called a "disproportionate share" of this immigration.[1]

The Mexicans who worked in the San Joaquin Valley cotton fields in the 1920s and 1930s were not peasants but seasoned workers who had labored on both sides of the border. They had come originally from areas of Mexico that had been disrupted by capitalist expansion since the 1880s: the central plateau area of Mexico, which encompassed Michoacán, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato; and the west-

ern Mexican states, near the U.S. border, of Baja California, Sinaloa, Sonora, and, to the north, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, and Nuevo León.[2]

The expansion of capitalist investment and the spread of massive production for the market that was to propel the Mexican economy changed the lives of rural workers, peasants, artisans, and crafts workers. By the late nineteenth century, foreign investment in Mexico had accelerated capitalist development in agriculture, mining, railroads, and industries. In rural areas large haciendas that produced for the market were expanding to swallow up small, independent villages. The independent Mexican peasantry disappeared, and by 1910 over nine and a half million people, 96 percent of Mexican families, were landless.[3]

As the growing network of railroads began to import relatively cheap manufactured goods into local areas, thousands of weavers, shoemakers, tobacco workers, leather workers, silversmiths, and other artisans and craftsmen were displaced. The growth of large textile mills alone, which replaced the traditional hand looms, forced 29,000 textile shops out of business. The pattern was repeated in other crafts; between 1895 and 1910, an estimated 30,000 artisans joined the industrial proletariat.[4]

Displaced rural workers found employment in Mexico's industries as the demand for labor grew. By 1910 almost 700,000 worked in mines, railroads, and textiles. No record exists of the number who scraped by as beggars, shoeshine boys, or prostitutes in the growing urban areas.[5] As in other industrializing areas, women became part of the wage-labor force. They made up one-third of the factory workers and were the mainstay of the budding textile industry.[6] Juana Padilla, for example, daughter of a rebozo maker, migrated to Mexico City with her brothers: "Fuimos a México para trabajar en las fábricas donde podíamos trabajar. Yo tenía catorce años. . . . Estaba muy joven. . . . Trabajé en la fábrica de colchas, y de rebozos, y las tarjetas postales y los zapatos, y una fábrica de cigarros." ("We went to Mexico [City] to work in the factories, where we could get work. I was fourteen years old. I was very young. I worked in a factory that made bedspreads, a rebozo factory, a postcard shop, a shoe factory, and a factory where they made cigarettes.")[7]

Workers who entered Mexican industry faced conditions reminiscent of those in England or the United States in the early days of industrialization. They labored for long hours in airless rooms under dangerous conditions. Women in textile factories sweated over the looms for fourteen to sixteen hours a day. Miners hacked away in dark mine shafts for twelve-hour shifts. Employers docked paychecks for misconduct (eu-

phemistically called "dancing without music") and for defects in the final product. In isolated areas of the mills and mines, the company store sold workers poor goods at inflated prices, gouging them still further.[8]

Whether they worked in rural areas or industry, Mexicans had become well acquainted with capitalist relations by the end of the nineteenth century. Roughly 80 percent remained in rural areas, yet these were hardly peasants tied to the land. Capitalist relations encouraged the development of a mobile, impermanent labor force which (as in California) would appear as needed and then disappear. An increasing number of dispossessed workers began to work as day laborers, hired hands, or sharecroppers, such as José Bañales, part Purépecha Indian, who left his village to work as a sharecropper and paid laborer on a hacienda near San Francisco Angumacutiro in Michoacán.[9] One Michoacán hacienda with forty-two resident workers hired an additional twenty-five workers from nearby towns for the harvest.[10] Work and patterns of hiring borrowed from traditional social relations were carried over into the wage economy and would resemble in many ways the work they would later do in California's cotton fields. Migrant workers were often assembled into crews of fifteen to twenty people under the direction of a leader from their village who acted as both labor contractor and supervisor. This leader reported to a mayordomo in charge of a section of the hacienda who reported, in turn, to the general manager. Workers were paid wages, often in the form of chits redeemable at the company store.[11] A worker on the La Guaracha hacienda remembers: "We worked from sunup to sundown. . . . The salary they gave us was three pesos a week and of this the company store took one and a half pesos, leaving us with only one and a half."[12]

Displacement, whether from the land or from traditional occupations, set in motion a process of migration in search of work. People first migrated within local areas, but by the late nineteenth century the expansion of roads and a railroad system that linked previously isolated areas of Mexico broadened the scope of migration.[13] By the early 1900s Mexicans were migrating into northern Mexico and across the border into the United States, drawn out of the rural areas by wages in newly opening industrial areas and the availability of work on the railroads and in mines and textile factories.[14] Many worked their way gradually, migrating north within Mexico to find work, usually on the railroads, in the mines, or in agriculture, staying awhile in one place, moving north again, finding more work, and, finally, crossing the border into the United States.

Mexican workers were lured north by higher wages in the expanding industries and agriculture of the southwestern and midwestern United States. In Mexico, people found themselves caught in the pincers of rising inflation and low wages. In 1908 workers received, on the average, 7 centavos less than in 1895. By the 1910s workers on one hacienda received only 31 to 37 centavos a day.[15] Industrial wages, although higher, were below the 5 pesos considered necessary for daily subsistence: in 1927 they still ranged from 1.29 to 1.786 pesos a day.[16] The low wages failed to match inflation rates. Between 1877 and 1903 the price of corn increased 50 percent, and the cost of beans and corn doubled between 1910 and 1920.[17] Beans sold for over $1 a pound.[18] By 1910 workers found their purchasing power to be four times higher in the United States, where they could earn 50 cents a day picking crops and $2.00 a day working on the railroads or in the mines.[19] By 1907 the stream of departing migrants from northwestern Michoacán became so pronounced that employers had begun to complain of losing their work force.[20]

Although estimates of Mexican migration are notoriously inexact, they agree on the rapid increase in immigration during and after the revolution. According to one source, the number of Mexicans migrating to the United States jumped from 17,760 in 1910 to 51,042 in 1920 and to 87,648 by 1924. By that year two million Mexicans had migrated to the United States.[21]

Because of the chaotic conditions of rapid capitalist expansion, the seasonal nature of some occupations, and uneven wage rates, Mexicans sought work in a variety of industries. As they had in Mexico, Mexican men in the United States worked on the railroads, in factories, in agriculture, in mines, and as day laborers. By the time they reached the San Joaquin Valley, cotton workers had had a broad variety of work experiences on both sides of the border. Braulio López, for example, had worked on the Mexican railroad. In the United States he worked as a miner in Arizona and New Mexico before settling in Los Angeles, where he laid tracks for the electric streetcar line and worked in an Anaheim cement plant. But these jobs were part of a work mosaic, held together by migration: he mined gold in the mines of Randsburg, California, labored on construction of the road that linked San Diego and Los Angeles, and migrated with his family to pick crops in the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys.[22]

Roberto Castro, of the Boswell ranch, had worked on the railroads in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas before settling in Corcoran, Cali-

fornia. Juan Magaña, originally a laborer on the Tierra Negras hacienda in Guanajuato, labored on Mexican railroads and in 1918 began working for the Southern Pacific Railroad before picking cotton in the San Joaquin Valley in 1927. Elias Garza, a displaced sharecropper from Michoacán, worked in a Mexican sugar mill, labored on Kansas railroads, and finally settled in Los Angeles, where he worked at a packing plant, in a stone quarry, and at a railroad station before he picked cotton. Gilbert Hernández made the transition from artisan to industrial worker to entrepreneur. Trained as a printer in Mexico, he worked on the Mexican railroads and in the mines of Cananea; in California, he worked as a day laborer, picked cotton, and, eventually, ran a pool hall. José Bañales from San Francisco Angumacutiro left the hacienda in 1907, laboring on the railroad in Kansas and cultivating plants for an Anaheim nursery before he began to pick cotton.[23]

The extent of migration and the variety of jobs meant that these workers were experienced proletariats, had acquired skills in many areas even though they were considered "unskilled labor," and had endured and adapted to a variety of working conditions. Thus when we speak of migrant cotton workers of the 1920s and 1930s, we are speaking as well of workers who were miners, day laborers, engineers, artisans, and steel hands. The experience and consciousness forged in the mines, on the railroads, in factories, and in the fields of Mexico and the United States were transferred to the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley.

COMMUNITY, CLASS, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

By 1926 the majority of cotton workers came from or through the towns around Los Angeles and the Imperial Valley. A small number worked in these areas temporarily or moved through them on the way to other jobs. Yet the majority of cotton workers made their homes in Los Angeles or the Imperial Valley, and it was in these communities that they formed the social networks they carried with them to the cotton fields. Los Angeles, which had remained a predominantly Mexican city until the 1880s, was still a magnet for Mexican migrants. The city's railroads linked the city to Mexico and other parts of the United States. *Enganchadores*, labor recruiters, set up makeshift offices and signed migrants up to work in the Colorado beet fields, midwestern mines and railroads, and the agricultural fields of California and other states. The expanding economy had sought Mexican workers to build Los Angeles and its infrastructure. Mexicans were the laboring backbone of the city by the late 1910s and they could find work there as unskilled laborers, indus-

trial workers, and agricultural workers in the fields which still composed most of what would become cosmopolitan Los Angeles. By 1920, 33,644 Mexicans lived in Los Angeles, making it the largest concentration of Mexicans anywhere outside of Mexico City. By 1930 the population would reach 97,116 in the city and 167,000 in the county.[24] New arrivals gravitated to the Mexican center of town, called Sonoratown, which was nestled close to the old placita and the railroad tracks and was readily accessible to labor recruiters, contractors, and ranchers seeking day laborers. Economic expansion and the growth of the interurban railway system in the 1920s encouraged Mexicans to move into the eastside communities of Belvedere, Boyle Heights, and Maravilla, to other barrios in communities such as Anaheim, El Monte, Pacoima, Azusa, Pomona, San Fernando, Watts (known as Tejuata by Mexicans), and to the barrio of Sotelo in West Los Angeles.[25]

Another concentration of pickers came from Mexican barrios in Brawley and Calexico and adjacent ranches in the reclaimed desert of the Imperial Valley. Mexicans had lived in the Valley since the late nineteenth century, when they had been hired to construct the railroad and pick crops. Adjacent to the Mexican border—the Mexican town of Mexicali adjoined Calexico on the California side of the border—the Imperial Valley was an easy destination for workers going north. By 1927 over 20,000 Mexicans lived and worked in Brawley; most were residents. By the 1920s Mexicans in the Valley worked primarily in agriculture, the main industry in the area. Some had learned to pick cotton here, when the Imperial Valley was the center of cotton production. When wages dropped in the 1920s, many of these migrated north to the San Joaquin Valley, where wages for picking were higher.[26]

Mexican barrios in both areas were overwhelmingly working class. Social and family ties cut across the faint class lines that began to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s. Even if store owners, barbers, small merchants, and contractors did not work as laborers, they had children, parents, uncles, cousins, or compadres who did. These ties generated in them concerns and obligations that slowed or prevented the development of an entrepreneurial class divorced from its working-class roots and community. Many of these entrepreneurs came from a working class background. Juan Magaña, for example, had worked on the railroads and picked cotton before opening a small grocery store in Hanford.[27] Others depended on working-class clients. Members of this merchant group saw themselves, and were viewed by many, as representatives of the community. They tended to be literate, some were bilingual, and most had

experience dealing with the Anglo world, its bureaucracy and its growers, business, and government.

Institutionalized racism, segregation, and economic hardship reinforced the bonds among Mexican workers and underscored their alienation from Anglo society. By the 1920s Mexican barrios had become segregated enclaves within Anglo society and, as Governor C. C. Young's report concluded, Mexicans tended to live together because of shared language and class and in response to prejudice and segregation.[28] Housing segregation was reflected in the uneven distribution in school populations: over 90 percent of the students in ten Los Angeles schools were Mexicans. Eight schools in the Imperial Valley were attended mostly by Mexican children.[29] Institutionalized racism contributed to low incomes and poor housing conditions and took a painful toll in death and disease. The infant mortality rate in Los Angeles from 1916 to 1929 was more than twice as high among Mexicans as among Anglos.[30] In 1927, Mexicans comprised 11 percent of the total population, yet accounted for 14 percent of all deaths in the city.[31]

Segregation, working-class status, and the geographic mobility of Mexican men and women reinforced their identity as Mexicans, lessened and narrowed their contact with Anglo-Americans, and reaffirmed the need to rely on each other in an Anglo-dominated society. Their lack of institutionalized social and political power underscored their reliance on each other. Thus as Mexican barrios grew they became less, rather than more, attached to Anglo-American institutions. The expansion of the Mexican population, rather than leading toward assimilation, helped create a stronger identification as working-class Mexicans.

Thus it was not surprising that in the 1920s and 1930s people called themselves Mexicans or Mexicanos, for what else were they? The majority were Mexicans by birth and citizenship: in Los Angeles, for example, 84 percent were Mexican-born. More significantly, few wanted to become naturalized citizens because, as C. C. Young's report claimed, they were "proud of their country of birth and slow to assimilate."[32] While in 1910 almost 46 percent of other immigrant groups became naturalized citizens, only 3 percent of the Mexican population wanted to be "Americans." By 1920 the number had risen only to a paltry 5.5 percent.[33] The proximity to the Mexican border, the constant influx of new immigrants with its consequent sense of contact with home villages, and the ease of returning to Mexico contributed to a sense of *Mexicanidad* (the quality of being Mexican) even after long periods of residence in the United States. In 1927 Manuel Gamio noted a proliferation of Mexican

flags and pictures of Mexican heroes prominently displayed in most Mexican houses, "giving patriotism thus an almost religious quality."[34]

National identity remained strong among the second generation. In 1932 an elementary school teacher reported that second-generation Mexican children singing the popular "We will be true to the red, white, and blue" instead sang "red, white, and green," substituting the colors of the Mexican flag for those of the U.S. flag. While other youngsters painted their sneakers the colors of the American flag to honor the 1933 Olympics taking place in Los Angeles, Mexican children painted their shoes red, white, and green.[35]

Their identity was also expressed in the tenacity with which Mexicans held on to the Spanish language. Some children among the often bilingual merchant class did learn English, but the working-class language was still overwhelmingly, and usually exclusively, Spanish. In a 1921 study of over a thousand Mexican families in Los Angeles, over half the men and almost three-quarters of the women did not speak English.[36] To an extent this reflected the lives of working people with little time to learn a second language, but for some it was a conscious choice. Guillermo Martínez, a field worker and young teenager in the 1930s, remembered his "complete animosity" toward learning English because it was the language of the conquerors. He felt his refusal to learn English was an expression of his dignity as a Mexican, although a teacher finally lured him to the language with the sonnets of Shakespeare.[37]

This identity as Mexicans did not preclude deep divisions and conflicts within these communities. Mexicans differentiated among themselves on the basis of ethnicity, regional identities, class, and length of residence in the United States. Recent immigrants derisively called United States–born Mexicans *pochos*. U.S.–born Mexicans in turn called new immigrants *cholos* or *chimacos*.[38] While understanding why their compatriots migrated north to earn more money, Mexicans were scornful of those who began to assimilate. One merchant who considered becoming a United States citizen rejected the idea, afraid his clients would consider him a traitor and boycott his business.[39] Popular ballads, such as "The Renegade," reflected the tension between the envy of economic advantages to be had in the United States and distaste for changing class, cultural, and ethnic identity:

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When they learn a little American
And dress up like dudes. . . .
But he who denies his race
Is the most miserable creature.
There is nothing in the world
So vile as . . .
The mean figure of the renegade.
And although far from you,
Dear Fatherland,
. . . A good Mexican
Never disowns the dear Fatherland
Of his affections.[40]

Economic changes had only begun to affect the community in ways later reflected in conflicts between Mexicans and the second generation who by the 1940s were called Mexican Americans. Strains had surfaced that caused friction within the community.[41] But, overall, Mexicans operated within a community bound together by common identities and by notions of cooperation, sharing, and reciprocity.

FAMILY, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND MUTUALITY

The family was the basic social and economic unit of society, and it included not only immediate kin but an extended linkage of grandparents, cousins, and other relatives. *Compadrazgo*, a system of godparentage, linked families and individuals together through fictive kinship. In compadrazgo, people entered a relationship that entailed family-like mutual obligations and responsibilities. Traditionally, godparents or compadres were chosen at the birth of each child and for significant rites of passage. At its most extensive, compadrazgo could link one hundred people together. Genetic and fictive kinship formalized mutual need for support, and the interlocking networks became the basic economic and social glue of the society.

Economic upheaval and migration and the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920 had disrupted family and social networks in Mexico. Migrating for work had separated parents and children, husbands and wives, siblings, relatives and friends, often for long periods of time. An increasing number of Mexicans met and married people from other areas or states of Mexico and bore children in yet other parts.[42] The Mexican Revolution accelerated social and economic disruption. Two million were killed as armies fought over the countryside, burning fields and driving off inhabitants. Agricultural production halted in some areas.

Factories closed and unemployment increased. The thin lines of communication workers had developed were severed within Mexico and between Mexico and the United States. The revolution loosened, weakened, and sundered families. People lost track of each other, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. Mateo Castro left the ranch in Tlazazalca, Michoacán, in 1909 to work in the United States. His son, Roberto, followed in 1912 but did not see his father until 1922. Roberto's mother, who remained in Mexico, never saw Mateo again.[43]

Male migration had shifted the gender balance in many parts of rural Mexico. Vicente Trinidad Navarro remembers that, in his Michoacán rancho, "había como siete mujeres por cada hombre" ("there were about seven women for each man").[44] Changing social conditions involved women in new ways. Women participated in industrial strikes, such as those that erupted at the Río Blanco and other textile factories in the Orizaba-Puebla textile industrial area. Women joined the revolution as camp followers who cooked, nursed, and provided sexual and emotional comfort, and fought and were even executed in the course of battle. Women of the Partido Liberal Mexicano, such as Josefina Arancibia, concealed guns in baby carriages and ran them across the border into Mexico.[45] Rural women facing advancing armies seized their children and joined the stream of refugees. Juan Gutiérrez-García fled rancho Ancihuácuaro with his mother to avoid the encroaching revolutionary armies of Chavez Inez García: his father had left in 1910 to work on the railroad. Fourteen-year-old Juana Padilla, her father killed by Zapatistas, worked in Mexico City factories and later sold bread with her mother and grandmother to soldiers at the train station in León as the Padillas worked their way north.[46]

To an unparalleled extent, the upheavals of migration and revolution led working-class Mexican women to shoulder increased responsibilities, migrate, and survive on their own. Women migrated without men, making their way to the United States, where they faced an uncertain future. Inés Amescua fled the revolution in 1915 along with a sister and younger brother, working her way through New Mexico and Arizona before settling in Brawley, California.[47] In the United States, Mexican women worked. Single women were more likely to work outside the home in garment factories, canneries, laundries, packing houses, and fields.[48] Although married women tended to work in the home, where they cooked, cleaned, and cared for the family, they often took in boarders and cooked, sewed, and washed clothes for money.[49] Yet desertion, widowhood, and economic hardship forced women into the labor mar-

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ket; for instance, Guillermo Martínez's widowed mother cleaned houses and washed laundry to support her children. Women often worked in agriculture, for, as Rosaura Sánchez points out, although cultural traditions frowned on Mexican women working "outside the home as waitresses, maids or laundry help, [they] were nevertheless needed to work in the fields during the seasonal harvest to which families migrated. Here women were culturally 'protected' and simultaneously exploited by the growers, as much as the male members of their families."[50] While some stayed in the camps to care for young children (often augmenting their income by selling food or doing laundry for single men), many others joined their families in the fields, taking their children with them.[51]

The changes in women's lives affected gender relations. Women living without men and women who entered the labor market had more physical freedom and increased access to economic resources. Although incomes were usually pooled, wage work outside the home increased women's contacts, lessened their reliance on the family unit, and increased their direct economic value within the family. Women found they had legal recourse against abusive mates, which gave them some support, even though they hesitated to use it. The changing images of women in the United States influenced Mexican women who, like their Anglo counterparts, saw tantalizing images of flappers on the screen in darkened movie theaters. One study reported that young Mexican women in Los Angeles went to the movies at least once a week, and even a small mutualista in rural Imperial Valley boasted among its few assets a "motion picture machine."[52] The increasingly consumer-oriented society of the 1920s offered clothes and makeup that copied cinematic images, and many younger women adopted short skirts, bobbed hair, and makeup. One confused man lamented in a corrido that "Even my old woman has changed on me. / She wears a bobtailed dress of silk, / goes about painted like a piñata / and goes at night to the dancing hall."[53]

The frustrations and upheavals of industrialization, migration, and revolution were most sharply felt within the families. The nuclear family unit was sometimes unsteady, and both men and women deserted their mates.[54] The compadrazgo networks were disrupted and shrunken, and there were signs that the extended family was breaking down. Richard Griswold del Castillo, for example, points to the increasing number of Mexican orphans who were institutionalized in Los Angeles instead of being cared for by kin or compadres. Yet these disruptions, while unsettling, simultaneously increased the individual's reliance on family and friends to adapt and survive, thus strengthening the bonds of family and

kinship networks. Capitalism enforced the individual's dependence on the family unit and in turn itself depended on the family to nurture, educate, recruit, and train workers. As a result, the family remained the primary institution that mediated between the needs of the workplace, society, and the desires of the individual.[55] Compadrazgo networks did not become as extensive in Los Angeles as they had been in Mexico, but they remained a crucial social link within Mexican barrios.[56]

These families and networks operated with mutually understood concepts of mutual need, reciprocity, and obligation that had been nourished in isolated communities in Mexico. These concepts persisted in California, not out of an abstracted idealism, but out of the gritty need to cooperate if the individual and the group were to survive.[57] Family needs usually superseded those of the individual.[58] Children often worked to help the family, and they usually turned their wages over to their family, even among the second generation. In a 1929 study thirty-eight out of forty young Mexican women in Los Angeles, born on both sides of the border, gave all or most of their pay to their parents.[59] Children took over household responsibilities, the burden falling heavily on females. Girls were often pulled out of school to take charge of the household on the death or absence of the mother or other older women. Lillie Gasca-Cuéllar went to school only a few years, "pero no fui muchos años porque mi mamá murió y yo tenía que cuidar a mis hermanitos." ("But I didn't go for many years because my mother died, and I had to take care of my little brothers.")[60] Sabina Cortez left school at fourteen to help her family during the Depression while her brothers, one younger and one twin, remained in school.[61]

The need for mutual assistance encouraged social mores which dictated that help be extended to a broad network of people linked by blood, fictive kinship, or friendship. Families supplied housing for new migrants, and people could rely on family members or compadres for food or even money. While aspects of mutual aid underlie any society, the importance of reciprocity was more powerful among immigrants. This (and the implied contrast with the non-Mexican community) was reflected in a 1932 study of Belvedere, near Los Angeles, which noted that "The communistic spirit of the Mexican is found in his attitude toward other Mexicans. During the present stringent times, when hunger and poverty are common, social workers report that as long as there is a little food in the Mexican district they know that it will be shared by all as far as it will go."[62]

Mexican communities were formed out of and based on these family and social ties. Mexican immigrants had already begun to form commu-

nities by the 1910s, some from remnants of Mexican communities dating back to the nineteenth century, when the Southwest had been the northern outreaches of Mexico. Mexicans, like other immigrants, migrated to where they had family and friends. Soledad Regelado explained that in her family's moves to Los Angeles, Hanford, and then Corcoran they were simply moving where "tenemos familiares" ("where we had relatives"). Family members moved in with one another, then found housing down the street or around the block, lacing whole areas with extended kin. Families separated by long periods of migration or the revolution were reunited. José Padilla moved to Brawley in 1927 to join his uncle and, the following year, sent for his wife, Juana, and their two children. Barrios began to reproduce communities of Mexico. The effect (and intention) of these settlement patterns was to recreate, at least partially, Mexican social networks. Barrios became known by the origins of their members. Migrants from San Francisco Angumacutiro in Michoacán migrated to Anaheim and San Fernando in California (although many kept a close enough tie with their origins to have their children's baptism registered in the Angumacutiro church). These communities thus became enclaves of social groups from Mexico.

Much like other immigrants, Mexicans extended the idea of mutual aid into community organizations, called mutual aid societies or *mutualistas*. The swell of immigrants in the 1910s expanded the membership of older mutualistas in California such as La Sociedad Progresista and La Sociedad Hispano Americano, and immigrants established new mutualistas, such as the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez in El Centro, founded in 1919, or the Sociedad Mutualista Miguel Hidalgo, established in Brawley in 1922.[63] Mutualista membership was broad, and while most of its members were workers, contractors and small merchants also joined in pooling their meager resources to provide insurance, financial aid, and burial assistance. Mutualistas charged dues—members of the Miguel Hidalgo Society of Brawley paid $2 a month, for example—yet they operated more on concepts of mutual aid and reciprocity than on a legalistic interpretation of membership. Mutualistas often accepted memberships of people sick or dying or gave help to indigents. In Brawley the Miguel Hidalgo Society helped indigents pay for medical care, transportation to Mexico, and funeral costs. Perhaps indicating shifting values within the community, some Brawley Mexican businessmen complained of the practice; significantly, however, the mutualista continued to extend aid to nonmembers.[64]

Thus although conditions strained family and social ties and affected gender relations, the hardships simultaneously increased individuals'

dependence on kinship and social networks. Ideas of mutuality and reciprocity that had been part of Mexican society were transferred to and institutionalized in workers' communities in the United States to form an important material bond among working-class Mexicans. These social networks, fired by the concept of mutual aid, were crucial in the development of Mexican communities, work crews, and organizations, and they became the vehicle and the expression of Mexicans' ability both to adapt to and to resist the conditions of life and work in California cotton fields.

COTTON WORK

In size and in the concentration of workers, cotton ranches and work resembled Carey McWilliams's descriptive term "factories in the field." Yet because the cycles of harvests, not machines, dictated work, the expansion of cotton-growing did not significantly change the work process or increase specialization. The work was hard. Workers began to pick as soon as the night dew had evaporated from the cotton bolls. On fields irrigated the day before, workers slogged through brown mud that oozed into their shoes and slowed their movements. For ten hours a day, they worked mile-long rows of cotton plants, each plant four to five feet high. Picking required skill, strength, and endurance. Workers stooped, stood, and often crawled to reach the bolls. Jessie de la Cruz remembers that she would cut the straps of her twelve-foot sack lengthwise and "tie the sack around my waist, and the sack would go between my legs, and I'd go down the cotton rows, picking cotton and just putting it in."[65]

Experienced pickers used both hands, quickly picking cotton bolls clean from their casings, avoiding branches and twigs, and working up and down the plant, stuffing cotton in a sack with one hand while picking bolls with the other and pausing only to pack the white bolls tightly into the bag. When the bag was full, the worker hoisted the hundred-pound sack, slid one end back, hefted the other end over one shoulder, and walked to the end of the row, where a contractor's assistant weighed the bag and, deducting for twigs and debris, tallied the weight on a list beside each worker's name. The worker then picked up the bag, climbed a rickety ladder, and emptied the sack of cotton into the wagon. The work took its toll. Workers' fingers were cut by sharp thorns, and their backs ached from bending over all day and carrying the heavy bag.[66]

While the pay was always low, the income varied depending on skill and experience. They worked under a piece-rate system; from 1925 to

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1930, the pay varied between $1.00 and $1.65 per hundred pounds. Piece rates acted as a built-in speed-up mechanism: income depended not only on how much cotton was in the field but on how fast and clean workers could pick. Adults could, on the average, pick between 180 and 300 pounds a day. Only under optimal conditions could the most experienced workers pick over 500 pounds. Strength enabled most men to pick more than women, but an experienced woman could easily outpick a novice.

Cotton picking was often labeled unskilled, yet experience, speed, strength, and dexterity made the difference between picking 80 or 400 pounds. It took experience to judge which bolls were ripe and to pick efficiently. Over the years, Mexicans developed skills in cotton picking. Child labor was a form of apprenticeship. Children began picking by the age of seven or eight, and younger children collected cotton dropped by adults or picked bolls and piled them in heaps for adults to bag. They learned to spot cotton ready for picking and acquired picking techniques. Jessie de la Cruz remembered, "I was just a little kid, but I remember going out there and picking cotton and just making little piles on the ground, and then my brothers or my uncles, who were older than me, would come up and put it in their sacks. That's when I was just a child, and that kept on for many years."[67] As a result, many were experienced pickers by their early teens, because "we just grew into it."[68] Some Mexicans were already experienced cotton workers when they began to work in the San Joaquin Valley: growers sought out Mexicans who had worked in the cotton-growing area of Laguna in Mexico, in Baja California, or in the Imperial Valley.[69]

COMMUNITY OF WORKERS IN COTTON

Migration is disrupting to workers' lives, and migrant workers are often viewed, from the outside, as lacking the homes, communities, and social ties needed to nurture families, friendships, and formal organizations. Yet workers were able to draw upon several sources that brought stability into their lives.

Within the migrant stream there were, and still are, different degrees of migrancy, intensified or alleviated by variations in economic conditions. In the 1920s most cotton workers lived in communities, often migrated to the same job or within the same circumference of jobs year after year, and each year returned to their home communities. Few were homeless or migrated without destination, though the number of such migrants was to increase in the Depression. Migrants should thus be seen

as attached, as if by a cord, to their home community, and they migrated without severing that cord. Workers usually migrated with family members and friends and thus recreated pockets of their home communities on the ranches on which they worked. These communities and their interlocking ties helped them both adapt to and resist the conditions in cotton.

Cotton picking offered workers a degree of stability for several reasons. Pay for experienced cotton pickers was as good as or better than other jobs. While California brick makers earned $3.00 to $4.00 a day, railroad workers made $2.48 to $4.75, and cannery workers earned from $2.80 to $4.00 a day, cotton pickers could earn from $3.00 to as much as $5.00.[70] The schedule of cotton picking, which began in September, peaked in October or November, and continued into January and February, provided work during the slack months in other crops, closing the gap between the grape harvest—the last work in summer—and the first work in spring. Encouraged by growers, workers who had hitherto returned to southern California in winter instead extended their stay at the labor camps or returned year after year to the same ranches. This steadier supply of jobs reduced the uncertainty of migration and stabilized migration patterns. The affordable car increased their ability to migrate considerable distances to find jobs, thus encouraging seasonal migration and, by making it easier to take a group of people, encouraged family labor.[71] By 1925, 90 percent of Mexican cotton pickers labored along with their families.[72] Migrating and working together reinforced the family as a social and economic unit and, as Douglas Foley remarked about Mexicans in South Texas, "drew the family together in a struggle for survival."[73]

Workers still faced uncertainty. As Arnold de la Cruz said,

> I know sometimes you didn't have a job. For instance, if you moved from one place to another, well, somebody would drive out there first and check around and then we'd move out there and try to find work. And if there was no work we'd stay there for two or three days while they went around further to look around until they found another place for us to move to. We'd go up there without finding any work and sometimes we used up what little money we had saved, we knew we'd need it for gas, so we'd save enough until we could keep on going, until we could find a job.[74]

Within the work force, workers found different levels of stability. Few workers in the 1920s simply wandered from job to job, a pattern of the bindlestiffs of the 1910s that would reemerge with the Depression. At the other end of the spectrum, only a few got full-time jobs on ranches. Most

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the Depression growers had failed to pay $10,000 in wages owed to workers.[128] Unable to buy food, families resorted to hunting rabbits, catching fish, and scrounging for mustard greens and mushrooms amid the Valley scrub.[129] When Jessie de la Cruz's family "didn't have anything to eat" in the winters after picking was over, "we would go out with the ditch bags and pick mustard greens and mushrooms. My oldest brother would go out and look for fish. I don't know how we survived. And that was not only my family but all the families around us."[130]

To add to their misery, hundreds of Mexican families living in San Joaquin Valley camps were marooned when the Fresno River overflowed and flooded 25,000 acres in 1932. Approximately 2,500 workers were evacuated, but 600 remained, facing starvation and surrounded by water that had "assumed the proportions of a vast inland sea."[131] Lack of money for gas reduced migration. Some stopped migrating north, and others simply remained in the Valley year-round. The López family, for example, stopped migrating north between 1930 and 1932 because "there was no money" to go until in 1933 they pooled their money with another family for the trip. Once there, the truck broke down, and "we never made it back to Anaheim. I've been here in Fresno since 1933."[132]

Deportations and repatriations further brutalized the community. Between 1929 and 1939 over one million Mexicans returned from the United States.[133] Raids on homes and popular public areas and the fact that Mexican consuls helped in the repatriation efforts made workers even more anxious about dealing with government agents. By 1931 an estimated 50,000 Mexicans had already been deported from California.[134] Some Mexicans returned willingly, as Jessie de la Cruz remembers, "because of the hardships they were going through here. They said if they were going to suffer hunger and everything, then 'we want to suffer it back with our families in Mexico.'"[135] Many were bitter. Mr. Piña of the San Joaquin Valley said, "My father left his best years of his life in this country because he worked hard in the mines and in the fields and when hard times came around, we were expendable, to be thrown like cattle out of this country."[136]

But Mexicans had carved out a world for themselves within the system of agricultural labor in California's cotton fields. Through their friends and families they had shaped networks in the cotton communities and labor camps. They faced the tenuous life of migrant workers, but some were able to take advantage of the structural changes introduced by cotton: they were able to stay longer in one place, work more steadily,

and maintain close familial and social ties. Even the most transient worker, through tenacity and effort, had been able to forge bonds and make connections. These bonds helped train all workers and protected them against the harshest aspects of work. Workers used them to seek jobs and to modify aspects of their work. And Mexican cotton workers used them to wage the largest agricultural strike to that date in the history of the United States: the cotton strike of 1933.