Los Betabeleros: Hispanic Sugar Beet Laborers in Cache Valley, 1941-1981

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LOS BETABELEROS: HISPANIC SUGAR BEET LABORERS
IN CACHE VALLEY, 1941-1981

by

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A plan B paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

Approved:

UTHAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2002
To Paul V. and Steffani Y. Washburn, whose assistance allowed me to begin this project; and to Brook Cole, whose patience and sustaining influence helped me to finish.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals helped to make this work possible. I cannot name them all, but I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Anne M. Butler for her extraordinary patience and support. I would also like to acknowledge John L. Powell for making the contents of Utah State University’s Special Collections materials readily available to me. Most of all, I am indebted to the betabeleros who revisited the past to share their stories with me. I thank you all.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the United States annexed over 800,000 square miles of formerly Mexican land. Boundary changes initiated by war and lucre thrust many Mexican people into the United States of America. The new political demarcation appeared artificial; Mexicans and Mexican Americans continued to travel to and from the new American southwest as they always had.

Migration to the United States from Mexico mushroomed after 1910, when a tumultuous revolution and poor economic conditions in Mexico encouraged Hispanics to look to the U.S. for jobs and stability. Mining industries, railroad companies, and farms in the United States demanded large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and Hispanics proved a readily available labor source. Over time, Mexicans and Chicanos clustered in low paying, low-prestige jobs where they composed a large but obscure segment of the United States population.

Cache Valley, which stretched from northern Utah into southeastern Idaho, served as an example of a region where Hispanics played a vital economic role. Area farmers relied on sugar beets as an important cash crop, but successful beet cultivation required periods of such intense drudgery that farmers had to find wage-laborers to expedite the work. Farmers and sugar companies actively recruited Mexicans and Chicanos, and the region drew many migrants.

Cache Valley’s Anglo communities depended on Hispanic farm labor, but migrants
remained disconnected from the dominant Anglo population in important ways. Differences in class, race, and culture segregated the two groups and rendered the migrants largely invisible to many of Cache Valley's Anglo residents.

Recorded history demonstrated the workers' shrouded status. In spite of the long-term presence of Hispanic laborers in Cache Valley, written local histories dealt almost exclusively with the region's white citizenry. The rise to prominence of Chicano studies as a historical field underscored a pronounced need for research into the lives of Cache Valley's Hispanic population.

Completed studies of Hispanic workers across the United States made important contributions to this investigation of Cache Valley's Mexican and Chicano migrants. In 1930, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States published a report on Mexican immigration to the U.S. The report illuminated the working conditions of Hispanic farm laborers, with portions dedicated specifically to the men, women, and children who labored in sugar beet fields.1 Despite attempts to mechanize the sugar beet industry, beet farmers relied on the strenuous hand labor described in *Mexican Immigration* for decades. The report represented a significant source for corroborating the accounts of former Cache Valley sugar beet laborers.

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In “The International Migration of Workers and Segmented Labor; Mexican Immigrant Workers in California Industrial Agriculture, 1900-1940,” Camille Guerin-Gonzales examined reasons why Anglo farmers in California regarded Hispanic agricultural workers as a desirable labor source. Mexican workers thought of their earnings in terms of the purchasing power the U.S. dollar maintained in Mexico, a perspective which made them more likely than Anglo workers to accept low wages. Additionally, farmers benefitted from migrants’ transience. Workers’ frequent moves complicated the difficulties of organization, rendering the laborers less likely to agitate for improved wages and conditions. The cycle of migration also benefitted farmers who harbored racist attitudes towards Hispanics. Mexicans and Chicanos performed important but undesirable work, and then disappeared from the communities they had served.\(^2\)

Farmers in Cache Valley shared the attitudes Guerin-Gonzales described. The issues raised in her California study resonated in this examination of Hispanics in Cache Valley.

Other publications offered insight into various aspects of Hispanic life. *The Mexican-American People: the Nation’s second Largest Minority*, by Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, surveyed many aspects of the Hispanic experience in the United States. The volume documented problems Mexicans and Chicanos faced in regard to substandard


The research considered Hispanics in various occupations, but the issues raised remained pertinent to the study of beet workers in Cache Valley. Erasmo Gamboa's \textit{Mexican Labor and World War II} presented a great wealth of information specific to Hispanic agricultural laborers.\footnote{Erasmo Gamboa, \textit{Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).} Although Gamboa's study focused on \textit{Bracero} workers, his investigation of working and living conditions, wages, and racial conflicts had implications that can be applied to migrants who lacked government contracts.

Sarah Deutsch's monograph also lent insight into the lives of Cache Valley laborers. In \textit{No Separate Refuge}, Deutsch evaluated changes in labor opportunities for Hispanics and the subsequent erosion of traditional communities. While examining changes in culture, class, and gender roles in Hispanic populations, the monograph demonstrated how labor patterns influenced culture.\footnote{Sarah Deutsch, \textit{No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).}

Richard Baker's \textit{Los Dos Mundos: Rural Mexican Americans, Another America}, studied race relations in a small Idaho city referred to as "Middlewest." Baker employed written records and candid interviews in a compelling demonstration of the effects of institutional racism. In the preface to his work, Baker expressed confidence that the

findings of his research could be applied to other American communities.\textsuperscript{6} Indeed, *Los Dos Mundos* had important implications for the study of Hispanics living in Anglo-dominated Cache Valley.

*Hispanics in the Mormon Zion*, by Jorge Iber, provided revealing information specific to the state of Utah. Iber scrutinized the experiences of Catholic Hispanics in comparison to those of Mormon Hispanics. His study clearly demonstrated the significance of religion in Utah communities.\textsuperscript{7} Cache Valley's predominantly Mormon population made *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion* an important resource for this paper.

Secondary works furnished a prominent backdrop for the examination of Hispanics in Cache Valley, but they failed to render a complete picture. Primary sources, particularly oral histories, fleshed out the skeletal outline created by the research in secondary works. Interviews with Anglo farmers and former *betabéleros* greatly enriched this study. The memories of men and women who labored in the beet fields enhanced the telling of the story of migrant farm workers in Cache Valley and in the United States.

While making a valuable contribution to this research, the reminiscences presented several difficulties. Oral historians recognize distinct dilemmas inherent to historical accounts vocalized after the fact, and these points merit discussion. First, memories are not static. They fade with age, meaning that an individual's recollections about long-past events and emotions may not remain accurate following the passage of time. Additionally,


memories are subject to reinterpretation. Experience, education, and changes in maturity may cause a person to view events or emotions differently than he/she once did. Thus, an individual’s report on a specific event or feeling may not mirror the description he/she would have given at the time of the occurrence.8

Oral historians have also documented that individuals relating their memories to others have a real tendency to romanticize history. In a 1995 article, María E. Montoya described this human proclivity toward the aggrandizement of the past. Her study cited instances of Hispanic workers who denied being victims of racial discrimination in the face of blatant evidence to the contrary.9

Aside from the questionable historical accuracy of the memories themselves, users of oral histories recognized that memories repeated aloud do not necessarily reflect an individual’s innermost thoughts. Rather, the reminiscences are intended for an audience.10 The type of audience a storyteller addresses may profoundly influence both the information the teller gives and the manner in which the material is related. The former Cache Valley farmers and beet laborers examined in this paper spoke to a complex audience. Although the informants most directly addressed their interviewer, at the same time they also consciously spoke to readers of this research, and to anyone who accesses


9 Ibid., 14; also see María E. Montoya, “The Roots of Economic and Ethnic Divisions in Northern New Mexico: The Case of the Civilian Conservation Corps,” Western Historical Quarterly 26 (Spring 1995): 27.

their archived interviews.

In light of the difficulties discussed above, the use of oral history may appear problematic; in reality, orally recounted memories remain a viable vehicle for getting at the meat of history. Oral sources may be used as effectively as penned and printed documents can be. Written records present difficulties of their own; they too are fraught with errors and inaccuracies. This means that responsible historians cannot rely solely on any particular source, be it oral or written, to paint a picture of the past.\textsuperscript{11}

Concerns specific to this study added to the larger dilemmas facing users of oral history. The small number of Hispanic beet laborers available to be interviewed constituted one difficulty faced by the investigation. Because of the migratory nature of the tasks sugar beet laborers performed, locating former workers proved problematic. Cache Valley's sugar beet industry collapsed in 1981, and the region's need for large numbers of seasonal laborers dissolved. Therefore, locating individuals with backgrounds in migratory beet labor proved difficult. One might assume that former betabeleros who made permanent homes in Cache Valley had positive experiences in the area that convinced them to stay. The recollections presented in this paper all represented success stories, but narratives of those who found no reason to remain in Cache Valley remain unacknowledged.

These concerns need not discount the viability of the former workers' reminiscences. Their stories should not remain untold simply because they are the only ones available. The life stories of these individuals cannot represent all of the Hispanic

sugar beet workers in Cache Valley, yet they are real. The information given by the participating individuals complements rather than contradicts written historical accounts, and helps to fill in a picture of what life was like for Mexican and Chicano beet laborers in Cache Valley.
LOS BETABELEROS: HISPANIC SUGAR BEET LABORERS
IN CACHE VALLEY, 1941-1981

We had it pretty rough.

María Chavez Holguin, interview by author

María Chavez Holguin, a former migrant who labored in Cache Valley’s sugar beet fields, described her experiences as an itinerant worker. “We had it pretty rough,” she observed.1 Although Holguin and her counterparts played a vital role in Cache Valley’s agricultural industry, area betabeleros occupied a humble socioeconomic status.

The experiences of Cache Valley’s migrant populace mirrored the working, living, and cultural milieu Hispanic beet laborers generally encountered and created within communities in the United States. This paper considers the identities Hispanic laborers carried with them to their associations with Cache Valley’s Caucasian residents. It argues that ultimately, the betabeleros’ limited social and economic opportunities set the framework for the subordinate position they occupied in the region’s rural communities. At the same time, the study gives voice to a previously neglected segment of the population and begins the process of documenting the history of twentieth-century Hispanics in Cache Valley.

White farmers who were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints settled Cache Valley during the nineteenth century. The area emerged as a welcoming environment for many forms of agricultural production, and farming quickly

1 María Elena Chavez Holguin, interview by author, 9 December 1998, Smithfield, Utah, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
became entrenched in the lifestyle and economy of the locale. Farm owners in the region participated in many types of agriculture, including the growth and manufacture of sugar beets. By the late nineteenth century, several sugar companies operated multiple processing factories in the area, and many farmers took advantage of the opportunity to grow sugar beets as a cash crop.

The fulfillment of labor needs represented an important concern for Cache Valley sugar beet growers. Successful beet cultivation required intensive, seasonal stoop labor for weeding, thinning, and harvesting. The jobs rarely attracted much interest from Anglo adults because of poor pay and sporadic opportunities for employment. As a result, farmers consistently worried about obtaining an adequate, inexpensive work force. Although traditionally farmers and their families worked in the fields, their efforts proved insufficient for peak labor periods. To alleviate the situation, sugar companies imported ethnic minorities to perform the grueling fieldwork.

Mexicans and Chicanos comprised the largest group of sugar beet contract workers in Cache Valley. Mexican nationals first came to the region in large numbers early in the twentieth century. Hispanic laborers gained reputations as hard workers willing to accept low wages and harsh living conditions. Farmers also found transient Mexicans an attractive work force because of the temporary nature of their residence. Migrants came to sugar beet areas during periods of grower need. Upon completion of the fieldwork, laborers left their host communities.

The growth and processing of sugar beets proved a complex and multifaceted operation that influenced diverse groups of people in different ways. Individuals’
positions within the industry determined how the enterprise affected their lives. Thus, Hispanic farm laborers experienced Cache Valley’s sugar beet industry from an entirely different perspective than did Anglo farm owners. Farmers concerned themselves with issues revolving around the production and harvest of a successful crop; but the migrant men, women, and children who worked the fields confronted a different set of imperatives. Laborers struggled for physical, economic, and cultural survival.

Ernesto Garza, a Chicano who labored in Cache Valley’s sugar beet fields as a child, recalled that the region’s Hispanic field workers existed on a plane separate from that of the Anglo farmers for whom they worked. Ernesto explained that there were “a few white kids [in the fields] but they weren’t out there like we were. They just went out there to kill the time and that’s because their folks sent them. With us...we had to work because...it was a way of life.” Clearly, Ernesto was aware that the life he led as a betabelero differed from the paths trod by his Anglo peers. In Ernesto’s world, grueling labor garnered life’s essentials; he certainly did not view his farm work as a way “to kill the time.”

Employment in the beet fields inevitably had a powerful effect on workers’ lifestyles. Besides bringing migrants to Cache Valley and other locations, the work determined how much money they had to provide a living for themselves and their families and how much time they had for rest and recreation. Indeed, work proved such a central aspect of life for betabeleros that the group was identified by occupation. Cognizance of

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2 Ernesto Garza, interview by author, 11 November 1998, Smithfield, Utah, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
laborers’ work environment necessarily precedes true understanding of the group.

Throughout the United States, individuals toiling for wages in sugar beet fields faced challenging conditions. The physically demanding nature of the labor proved difficult for betabeleros. Workers spent their days bending over to thin and weed beets with short-handled hoes, or to “top” them with long, sharp knives. A report of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce described the work this way:

“The work required ... necessitates much backbending, stooping, kneeling, and even, in some cases, crawling across the fields on all fours, and working in a stooping posture throughout the day, and day after day, until specific operations are completed. Obviously, it is arduous, tedious, repetitive, monotonous, and exacting, often requiring the laborer to toil in the dirt, dust, and heat.”

Former field laborers interviewed for this study had much to say about the assignments they once executed on Cache Valley’s beet farms. Benito García, one of these individuals, said that his fieldwork consisted largely of thinning the beet plants. He recalled that before the widespread use of monogerm seed, rows of beets “were as thick as lettuce.” He described working over the dense foliage with a short-handed hoe that forced him to bend over all day. María Chavez Holguin also spoke about thinning and weeding beet fields with “small hoes.” She explained that some women and elderly persons occasionally made use of long handled hoes. Extended handles alleviated the strain on workers’ backs, but proved slower and less precise than the shorter instruments.

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5 Ibid.
Since speed and efficiency translated into higher earnings, many field hands used the safer, more healthful tools only as a last resort.\(^6\)

Laborers harvested and topped the beets by hand in the frostiness of late fall; a process that introduced workers to new health hazards. Using the sharp “sticker” on the end of a beet knife, *betabeleros* picked up beets that stretched to eight or ten inches in length. Then, workers propped the heavy legumes on one knee to be topped. The operation required a level of deftness and dexterity difficult to achieve in the frigid weather, and “It was cold out there!”\(^7\) Numb fingers and unsafe methodology led to countless accidents; scars representing misses with the beet knives covered many *betabeleros’* legs.\(^8\)

Harsh weather conditions also affected field hands during the summer months. In the American Southwest, beet laborers worked in temperatures that soared to 145°.\(^9\) María Meza recalled watching her mother and aunt wrestling with assignments in Cache Valley’s beet fields. She said of herself and her siblings, “We’d be out in the middle of the field and we’d have to go get water for them and bring them water. Because way back, they used to make the fields were like a mile long... and on the hot hot days, we’d have to go clear to the other end and get water from the cars that were parked on the opposite

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\(^6\) Holguin, interview by author.

\(^7\) María García Meza, interview by author, 12 December 1998, Franklin, Idaho, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Chamber of Commerce of the United States, “Mexican Immigration,” 15.
The long days that marked labor in United States beet fields further taxed betabeleros' stamina. Field hands often toiled for ten or more hours per day when they could find work. Ernesto Garza and his wife, Elida Barera Garza, experienced this in Cache Valley. Ernesto explained, "You'd work every day. We didn't just work eight hours. I mean, you've got to realize that it was from daylight, to, you know...." he trailed off. "[It was] sunup to sundown," his wife filled in.

The García family also struggled through long days. María García Meza's mother prepared breakfast in the early mornings before waking the children. The family brought lunch meat, cheese, and bread to the fields and made sandwiches at midday. María's mother allowed the young children to play at intervals during the day, and María admitted that "sometimes we would eat all the lunch before lunchtime and nobody would get to eat." Going without lunch made a ten-hour day extremely wearisome. Even when the children didn't disturb the food set aside for the noon meal María often found her mother crying in the fields out of pure exhaustion. "It was hard," she said.

Both primary and secondary sources confirmed that the work beet laborers performed was indeed, "hard." It demanded a great deal of physical exertion and carried

10 Meza, interview by author.

11 Ernesto Garza, interview by author.

12 Elida Barera Garza, interview by author, 11 November 1998, Smithfield, Utah, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

13 Meza, interview by author.
with it a high risk of injury. Partly because of its difficulty, the work garnered little prestige in Cache Valley communities. According to the United States Chamber of commerce, Anglo farmers hired Mexicans and Chicanos to perform labor that whites would not do.\textsuperscript{14} The report went on to say that many times "whites [were] unwilling to perform Mexican labor or work in the same fields as Mexicans."\textsuperscript{15} Mildred Cole, the wife of a Cache Valley farmer, said that "the white people...I guess they figured they were too good for that. Because, oh, that was hard work, and only a little money doing it, you know."\textsuperscript{16}

Another local farm owner remembered the rejection of betabeleros by the Anglo community. He said, "They looked at them as a lower class because they came in here to do that kind of work."\textsuperscript{17} Inevitably, the people whose economic survival depended on completing the lowly, menial tasks shunned by the community at large found themselves on a lower rung of the social ladder than those who rejected field work for themselves.

Farmers and field laborers were aware of class distinctions and thought of themselves as belonging to specific classes. In a 1961 Gallup Poll, the largest group of farmers surveyed identified themselves as "middle class." In contrast, more farm

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 3, 17.
\item[15] Ibid., p. 33.
\item[17] Evan B. Hall, interview by author, 30 June 1998, Smithfield, Utah, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
\end{footnotes}
employees though of themselves as "working class" than any other category. Farm owners and farm workers obviously did not enjoy the same status, and each group harbored perceptions about the other. Gradually, the image of Hispanics as migrant workers became deeply embedded in the Anglo mind. Evan Hall, who grew up on a Cache Valley farm, remembered conversing with and playing games with several migrant children that were about his age. When asked if there was feeling of social equality about their relationships, Hall answered in the negative. One Hispanic laborer explained that jobs isolate Americans because "in America your job is the basis for your very identity." The low class status that many Hispanics occupied came to be closely associated with their race and ethnicity.

Laborers arranged their lives around the arbitrary conditions of their jobs, and readying themselves for assignments at various locations across the United States was an important business. Some families, like the Garzas, masterminded the work-driven expeditions themselves. Ernesto Garza remembered the well-defined procedures his

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20 Hall, interview by author.

family followed each year to find employment. First, Ernesto’s father traveled to San Antonio and signed a contract with the Amalgamated Sugar Company. Amalgamated then assigned the family to specific work locations, and gave Francisco Garza a cash payment to cover the transportation expenses of each working member of his family. With this transaction complete, the sugar company expected the Garza family to arrive at the predetermined location within a designated time period.\textsuperscript{22}

Other migrants signed on with labor crews, like the one run by María Chavez Holguin’s family. María’s father owned a truck large enough to carry multiple families and their luggage on a long journey. Every year, he traveled to Brownsville, Texas, and contracted with “the [sugar] company” to deposit \textit{betabeleros} at set places and times. Then, Chavez hired would-be travelers who either lacked transportation or the ability to arrange for jobs themselves. Once the migration was underway, María’s father negotiated wage rates with farmers. Upon completion of an assignment, farmers paid Chavez. He took some of the money to pay for his efforts as the crew boss, and divided the rest among crew members according to how much work each laborer contributed.

María’s brothers handled the outfit’s finances. They recorded the names of all the \textit{betabeleros} and every day marked down the total number of rows each individual worked. The system used by the Chavez family relied on honesty among all participants. Group members had the responsibility of describing their work precisely; and theoretically, María’s brothers recorded the reports accurately.

Hard-earned money was at stake for both the laborers and the crew boss, and

\textsuperscript{22} Ernesto Garza, interview by author.
María recalled occasions when discrepancies appeared in the organization’s record books. The Chavez family blamed such incidents on betabeleros who over-reported the number of rows they had completed. Workers who resented the crew boss taking a share of their earnings may well have done this. However, it is also possible that the illiterate Chavez bookkeepers propagated all or some of the errors. Episodes like this demonstrated the tremendous opportunities for mistrust within the Hispanic community, thus weakening migrants’ ability to respond to oppression in a united manner.

Whether laborers traveled as solitary families or with larger groups, the perpetual instability inherent to temporary agricultural work posed many difficulties. Migrants’ frequent moves constituted a logistical struggle of colossal proportions. María Meza’s recollections of her family’s journeys with a labor crew painted a picture of poverty not uncommon in the experience of Hispanic field workers. According to María’s account, it took almost a week for the company to commute from Texas to Utah, a distance of more than 1,700 miles. While on their trek, the betabeleros literally lived on the road. At night, the driver pulled the truck over to the side of the highway and the migrants built fires to cook their beans. Crew members ate and slept just off the thoroughfare, and the morning’s early risers ate leftovers as breakfast before commencing another day’s drive.

Families and individuals who signed on with the gang took responsibility for their own well-being on the trip. Everyone provided his/her own food and bedding, requiring the truck to carry mass amounts of luggage. Sometimes the rickety, burdened conveyance overheated when traveling uphill and its brake system required manual backup. María

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23 Holguin, interview by author.
recalled a "tall, skinny man" in her family's crew who sat on the back of the truck bed. When the truck stopped moving, it was his job to jump off the back and jam rocks under the wheels so the vehicle would not roll backwards. In this manner, the group traveled several hundred torturous miles each day.

Families who migrated without crews faced other challenges. They shouldered the expenses of maintaining an automobile, and struggled to pack their belongings within its limited confines. When a car simply could not accommodate family members and their luggage, migrants wrapped bulky items in gunny sacks and tied them to front and rear bumpers.

María García Meza remembered the "odd looks" Anglos bestowed on traveling migrants, but she reported being too young to understand all of the ways in which she and her peers were atypical. "That was our way of living," she explained.\textsuperscript{24} This "way of living" was the only lifestyle migrants' limited financial resources afforded them. They had no money for hotels, so they slept on roadsides until they arrived at the marginal housing various farmers and sugar companies provided for their temporary use.

The hardships of the migrants' journey had significant social repercussions. The nature of the trip demanded that travelers forego consistent access to toilet and bath facilities. The betabela\textsuperscript{ros}' inability to keep clean must have been evident to anyone who had personal contact with them. Sensibility of the migrants' destitute circumstances did not require close proximity. The travel methods employed by the laborers proved so abnormal as to attract attention from otherwise indifferent passers-by; in fact, those

\textsuperscript{24} Meza, interview by author.
methods effectively advertised the migrants' indigence. Middle-class Americans did not drive across the United States in decrepit vehicles crowded with people. They did not sleep on roadsides, struggling to cook their food and to clean themselves without running water. María Meza declined to interpret the “odd looks” that frequently greeted her crew, but it is certain that even casual observers recognized the *betabeleros’* poverty.

Individuals who used socioeconomic status as a measuring stick in determining a person’s place in society surely found the migrants lacking. Accordingly, many middle class Americans rejected migrant workers as social equals.

Traveling long distances offered challenges to *betabeleros* on numerous fronts. The difficulty of frequent journeys extended beyond the logistics of moving and the social fallout from workers’ travel methods. Days that laborers spent in relocation were expensive both in the actual cost of travel and in terms of lost work days. Additionally, the seasonal nature of sugar beet labor prevented families from making enough money to achieve real economic security.

Migrants’ repeated moves and the frequent use of child labor combined to diminish the likelihood of transient children succeeding in school. From the age of six, María García Meza worked with her mother and siblings in Cache Valley’s beet fields. Legally, children younger than fourteen years old were not allowed to work, but María reported

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that "there were a lot of kids younger than that." One study showed that 50% of child laborers (between the ages of six and sixteen years) commonly worked eight hours daily during peak periods. Numerous interruptions in youngsters’ schooling coupled with poor attendance to hamper their academic development. All five of the former beet laborers interviewed for this study discussed their experiences with child labor and lack of formal education.

Elida Barera Garza explained that her family needed each member to contribute to the household income, and so children began working as soon as they were able. Elida recalled struggling in the beet fields when she was ten years old; her younger brother commenced working at the age of eight. Martin Barera collected the wages earned by the entire family, and Elida remembered receiving a pay-day allowance that was far smaller than her actual earnings. The Bareras’ financial reliance on juvenile labor effectively kept the children out of school. In her entire life, Elida spent a total of several months in an organized classrooms.

Ernesto Garza told a similar story. He started performing adult fieldwork in early adolescence when his family started migrating. Ernesto remembered a younger brother, only seven or eight years old, working in the fields. Francisco Garza collected and kept

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26 Meza, interview by author.


28 Elida Garza, interview by author.
the household’s earnings, and “it pretty well had to be that way.”²⁹ It took the wages of each adult and child to keep the Garzas afloat financially.

The family was only “home” in Texas for several months of the school year, and maintaining academic proficiency proved impossible. Ernesto effectively dropped out of school with the advent of his household’s migration. He reported that his parents never tried to enroll him or the other children in school as they canvassed the country. Neither of Ernesto’s parents had formal education, and they did not consider schooling as necessary as the incomes their children could earn.³⁰

During thinning and weeding times, María and Benito García worked behind their mother picking up the weeds and excess beet plants. As a very small child, María emptied her modest gunnysack into a larger bag carried by one of her older brothers. By the time she was twelve years old, she consistently managed adult labor. María insisted that farmers knew she was underage. Although there was no documentation of children’s birthdays, “They could see how young we were ... We were just kids. I’m sure they were aware of it.”³¹

The story of the Garcías’ experience with formal education echoed that of many other migrant Hispanics. In school, Marfa and her siblings always lagged behind their Anglo peers. Only Spanish was spoken in their home, and they missed months of class at a time while migrating. When the family settled permanently in Lewiston in 1952, María’s

²⁹ Ernesto Garza, interview by author.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Meza, interview by author.
oldest brother, Benito, left school entirely. He took a full time job that for a time enabled
the Garcías to improve the younger children’s academic opportunities. Benito married in
1957. With Benito’s marriage and new financial responsibilities, the family budget
demanded that María earn a higher income. When she left school permanently, she was
fourteen years old and in the sixth grade.32

As the children of a crew boss, María Chavez and her siblings occupied a
privileged position among migrants. In spite of this, in 1998 María Chavez Holguín
retained many memories of hard work and harsh living conditions. She was eight years
old when she began wrestling with chores in Cache Valley’s sugar beet fields, and she
typically worked nine or ten hour days along with the other members of her father’s crew.

In an unexceptional scenario, the Chavez children furnished a vital amount to their
family’s income. Their work was part of a household effort, and the money that came of
their labor belonged to the entire unit. “[We] gave it all to my dad,” María explained.
Chavez gave money to the children when they needed it, but initially, all wages went
directly to him. The family was so steeped in the tradition that María remembered her
older brothers turning their earnings over to their father even after they married.

School attendance proved a matter of secondary importance; even for the children
of the crew boss. María Chavez sometimes attended class, but frequent moves made
learning difficult. “I was scared,” she recounted, “It [school] was already started ... and I
only went about two months out of every year.” María knew she was behind, and she
knew from experience that “the teachers [didn’t] want to go back to teach you.” María

32 Ibid.
“didn’t ever learn very much,” but her brothers fared even more poorly. None of the Chavez boys ever learned to read. They were always behind in school, and as they got older their situation embarrassed them and they left permanently.\(^{33}\)

Hispanic parents recognized the long-term opportunities that academic training could give their children, but most simply were not in a position to forego the income that child labor brought to their households. The potential advantages of keeping children in school could not outweigh the necessity of having them work in the fields, and so for many families, education was not a viable choice. When migrant children did attend classes, they typically found themselves hopelessly delayed in academics and older than Anglos in the same grade.\(^{34}\) Studies conducted in Utah during the 1950s and 1960s confirmed that students with Spanish surnames consistently lagged far behind their Anglo peers in academic subjects. Further, research disclosed that white students in northern Utah rejected and disparaged the Hispanic youths who managed to attend school.\(^{35}\)

Denied formal educations by circumstance and embarrassed by an uncomfortable social environment, Hispanic migrant children grew up on a distinctly uneven footing when compared to their Anglo peers.

This inequitable situation did not correct itself as young Hispanics grew to adulthood. Rather, the disparity increased as members of the Anglo community were

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\(^{33}\) Holguin, interview by author.

\(^{34}\) Chamber of Commerce of the United States, “Mexican Immigration,” 61.

\(^{35}\) Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion*, 75.
likely to complete high school.\textsuperscript{36} The migrant workers in this study reported their embarrassment at their lack of academic achievement in the elementary grades; it is doubtful that the pain of failure grew less bothersome with the passage of years. One wonders whether it proved less humiliating to be viewed as a “dumb” adult as it was to be thought a “dumb” child. Cache Valley’s migrant workers were not dull-witted. However, their lifestyles often precluded their success in Anglo classrooms. This situation helped to set them up for a subordinate position in white society. Without secondary or even elementary educations, they were apt to remain in low-paying, low prestige jobs.

Living conditions for Anglos and Hispanics proved as disparate as the educational opportunities the two groups experienced. Migrant laborers and their families often inhabited shelters unfit for occupation. Overcrowding proved epidemic, partly because Betabeleros often had large families, and partly because employers assigned Mexican and Chicano workers to tiny housing units.\textsuperscript{37} Congestion within individual dwellings was not the only deficiency migrants encountered in the accommodations designated for laborers. Workers’ lodgings regularly lacked basic amenities like indoor plumbing and sanitary facilities.\textsuperscript{38}

Examination of laborers’ living quarters illuminated an important component of their lives and identities. Housing affected workers in many ways. It determined in large

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Leo Grebler, \textit{The Mexican-American People: The Nation’s Second Largest Minority}, 205.

part whether they could rest at night after a long day's work, or whether they would spend hours hauling the water necessary for cooking, bathing, and laundry. Poor living conditions obligated many *betabeleros* to neglect personal hygiene, endangering their physical health and decreasing their opportunities for social acceptance in the Anglo community. Migrants' inadequate lodgings served to both generate and reinforce stereotypes, as the larger society looked at how Hispanic beet laborers lived.

Elida Barera's family boarded in an Amalga, Utah, labor camp year after year as the migration cycle brought them to Cache Valley. Elida remembered that the barracks-style camp provided a two-room apartment for the family. Walls were constructed of bare sheetrock, and the rooms remained uninsulated because the camp's primary use occurred during the warm summer months. Each apartment contained a stove for cooking and heating water. The camp had plumbed outdoor bathrooms, and the Bareras had access to water from a tap located approximately fifty yards from their apartment. Elida clearly remembered the chore of hauling water into the house to be heated and used for bathing and doing laundry. Although the camp featured outdoor showers after the mid-1950s, Elida's father would not allow her to use the facilities because the dilapidated walls of the women's bathing room sported holes large enough for men to look through.  

Members of the Chavez labor crew lived in the same Amalga, Utah, camp while working in Cache Valley. María Chavez Holguin's depiction of the workers' quarters mirrored the account given by Elida Garza. María described the camp as consisting of hotel style apartments, with each unit including two rooms. The cramped quarters that the

39 Elida Garza, interview by author.
The Chavez family occupied a family of eleven people. María reported that conditions at the camp “[weren’t] very good.” The apartments’ thin walls exposed migrants to extreme temperature fluctuations. “When it was cold, it was cold, when it was hot, it was hot,” she remembered. Like the Bareras, the Chavez family got its water from an outdoor tap about fifty yards from the apartment. Limited toilet and shower facilities also had open-air locations. The complex furnished two toilets and two showers for women, and two of each for men. These facilities proved inadequate for the fifty or more residents living in the camp at any one time. “It was like camping,” María explained.

The García and Garza families avoided living in labor camps. Instead, both families chose housing provided by the sugar company or by the farmers for whom they worked. Typically, the small dwellings the Garcías lived in had one indoor cold water tap, a stove, and an outhouse. Benito remembered that on “Saturday afternoon[s], we heated the water on the stove and bathed in a round tub. Everyone vacated the room while we each bathed. We did laundry on Sunday the same method as bathing. There were no Laundromats yet.” Occasionally, the Garcías stayed in homes with indoor toilets. However, these structures usually housed multiple families, and María García recalled other families claiming the room in the house with access to the bathroom. “We always

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40 Holguin, interview by author.

41 García, interview by author.

had to use the outhouse," she said.\textsuperscript{43}

Like the Garcías, the Garza family lived in a series of houses provided by the Amalgamated Sugar Company. "They weren’t the best places," Ernesto said. "We had a lot of the outhouses for toilets. There were some homes that we lived in \textit{did} have inside plumbing, but the biggest share of them didn’t." The lack of indoor plumbing had important implications for the Garzas. Because they had to haul and heat water for use, bathing and washing laundry proved time consuming chores. For that reason, the Garzas bathed only once every week. They wore the same clothes to the fields every day, changing into clean garments only after their weekly baths.

Once, the Garzas shared a house with another family. The residence boasted an indoor shower and three rooms. Since the Garza household alone consisted of thirteen members, the dwelling was grossly overcrowded and Ernesto recalled that some of the group always had to sleep outside. Still, he remembers it as “one of the better homes” his family inhabited.\textsuperscript{44}

In 1962, Ernesto met and married Elida Barera. For years, the couple lived in a small Smithfield, Utah, home. A cold water tap ran inside the house, but the domicile lacked sink, shower, and toilet facilities. The Garzas also suffered for want of an adequate heating system. One winter, frigid temperatures inside the house broke the indoor faucet.\textsuperscript{45} Elida and her husband laughed as they reminisced about this experience, which

\textsuperscript{43} Meza, interview by author.

\textsuperscript{44} Ernesto Garza, interview by author.

\textsuperscript{45} Elida Garza, interview by author.
spoke to their good humor and resilience. However, stories like theirs clearly demonstrated the decades during which Hispanics felt that they could not aspire to decent housing.

The preceding descriptions of Hispanics’ living situations demonstrated that in Cache Valley, as in other parts of the U.S., circumstances relegated migrants to dwellings that were well below average in quality. In the 1950s and 1960s, the poorest of Cache Valley’s Anglo farm families enjoyed indoor plumbing and sufficient heat. Still, white farmers firmly believed that the housing they provided for migrant workers was adequate for the “class” of people who used the structures. Laborers had no alternative other than acquiescence to what was provided. Elida Barera Garza explained, “We didn’t complain because we had to do it.” Hispanic workers’ ostensible acceptance of deficient living conditions further reinforced the Anglo notion that poor treatment of betabeleros was legitimate.

Examination of workers’ recreational habits provided further evidence of their status in Cache Valley society. María García Meza stated that during her childhood, her family listened to the radio and made popcorn “for fun.” As she got older, María’s choices for entertainment extended somewhat. The Garcías lived several miles from the movie house in Lewiston, Utah, and sometimes María and her siblings walked to the theater to view English-language films. Maria did not remember going to any parties except an occasional wedding, and reported that throughout her youth the radio remained the family’s primary source of amusement.

46 Ibid., emphasis added.
Benito, seven years María's senior, described the Garcías' social life from the perspective of a young adult. He reported that the extended family had a lot of musical talent, used at occasional dances for the local Mexican community. Additionally, the family's affiliation with the Roman Catholic church offered the household association with other members of Cache Valley's Hispanic Catholic community.

Members of the Chavez family sometimes joined in recreation with other crew members. Religious observances helped break the monotony of the family's work-driven existence, and María Chavez Holguín remembered infrequent community gatherings during municipal events like "Smithfield Days." On these occasions her family and friends "got together, just [with the] Mexicans."  

Elida and Ernesto Garza did not report any leisure activities during the years they labored in the beet fields. Their lives revolved around hard work, and, "there wasn't much of a social life, really." The Garzas said that their primary source of recreation had been fraternizing in the fields while working with people outside of their families. While executing their assignments, laborers from different crews found time to "visit a little." Indeed, it was through one of these "visits" that Ernesto and Elida met.

Individuals who characterized their recreation in terms of going to church, making popcorn, and carrying on conversations while working have not described a middle-class experience. Evidently, Cache Valley's Hispanic sugar beet laborers did not live the

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47 Holguín, interview by author.

48 Ernesto Garza, interview by author.

49 Ernesto Garza, interview by author; Elida Garza, interview by author.
lifestyles common to the area's Anglo farm owners. Work dominated betabeleros' lives, and left little time and opportunity for other activities. When migrants did recreate, they did so among themselves, isolated from the larger community.

Cache Valley's betabeleros differed from their Anglo neighbors in ways that extended beyond the migrants' marginal socioeconomic status. Cultural traits, like primary use of the Spanish language and loyalty to the Roman Catholic religion, stood out as conspicuous (although not universal) patterns among the Hispanic families who migrated for work in the beet fields. Cultural differences represented consequential barriers between betabeleros and Anglos in Cache Valley.

Although Mexican and Chicano workers recognized the benefits of learning English, they regarded their native tongue as an important aspect of their own culture. One author reported that Spanish represented "a key source of identification and pride" for Mexicans. Language comprised an important mainstay for formulating and preserving cultural and individual identity.\(^{50}\) All of the former beet laborers interviewed for this study reported that members of their childhood households spoke Spanish almost exclusively.\(^{51}\) Family and other social ties kept the language alive in the United States for generations.

If perpetuating the Spanish language helped Hispanics to sustain ethnic character, it also had the effect of alienating them from the larger culture in Cache Valley. Few area Anglos spoke Spanish fluently and farmers relied on laborers' ability to communicate in

\(^{50}\) Baker, *Los Dos Mundos*, 68.

\(^{51}\) García, Elida Garza, Ernesto Garza, Holguin, Meza, interviews by author.
English. Although farmers needed Hispanics' labor, they rarely took the burden of communication upon themselves. Their superior position on the valley's economic and social hierarchy insured that they did not have to.

Spanish-speaking adults who could not or would not speak English found themselves at a disadvantage when they had to leave negotiations and other important discussions to children. An Anglo farmer whose parents operated a small store in Cache Valley explained that many families relied on young people to handle English communications for large groups. He said, "the Mexican people most generally had someone, even if it was young children - Especially if they were from Texas. Then they had kids or young people who could speak English...Broken English, but you could understand them." Such was the situation of the García family. María García Meza reported that her mother understood some English, but never spoke it. When using English proved necessary, one of María's brothers spoke for the family.

The language barrier led to misunderstandings and mistrust between groups. One Cache Valley farmer believed that "sometimes [betaveleros] would speak more English than they would let on that they did. You'd try to correct them in the way they were doing it, and, 'no comprendo,' and all that sort of thing, you know...they knew what you were saying. They just didn't want you to think they knew." On the other hand,

52 Hall, interview by author.
53 Meza, interview by author.
54 Stephen M. Bodily, interview by author, 27 June, 1998, Lewiston, Utah, tape recording, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.
laborers who could not speak English at all or who spoke very little existed in a compromised position. Some reported that salesmen and other members of the English-speaking community treated migrants unfairly.\(^5\)

Language differences proved a formidable obstacle to the formation of personal relationships between beet laborers and farm owners. If more complex relationships had formed, they might have helped to break down some of the stereotypes that existed in the area. As it happened, the lack of direct communication between farmers and laborers led to an atmosphere of suspicion and wariness between groups.

Like language, religion constituted an integral part of Mexican and Chicano culture that served to further distance betabeleros from Cache Valley’s Anglo society. Most Mexicans, both in Mexico and in the United States, followed the Catholic faith. One author wrote that, “Historically to be Mexican is to be Catholic,” and Catholicism permeated Hispanic society.\(^5\)

Conversely, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints dominated Cache Valley communities.\(^5\) Church members shared an ideological bond, and the organizations’s auxiliaries brought church members together in a variety of capacities several times each week. Members enjoyed many opportunities to interact socially with others in their religious communities.

\(^5\) Garcia, to Cole.


\(^5\) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is commonly known as the “Mormon” church, and its members are sometimes called “Mormons.”
Most of the Mexican and Chicano laborers who passed through Cache Valley adhered to the Catholic faith. They did not enjoy the social support network that area Mormons utilized. Transportation to the valley’s thinly spread Catholic churches presented a transportation problem for some migrants. María García Meza recalled an incident in which the Mormon farmers who provided the García family’s housing tried to take them to a Catholic church. The farmers, however, proved unfamiliar with the locations of non-Mormon meetinghouses. They left the García family at a Baptist church by mistake.58

Other families struggled to find churches that offered services in Spanish. Several former betabeleros described how their families traveled to a church in Preston, Idaho, on Saturday nights to attend church services when Spanish-speaking priests were in town.59 Migrants had irregular opportunities for formal worship, and religious activities offered limited occasions for socializing. The obstacles migrants confronted in physically attending church, taken in combination with their frequent moves, left many migrants disconnected from their own spiritual communities. At the same time, religious distinctions between Hispanic field workers and the larger white society segregated the groups.

Several Mormon doctrines proved key in examining how religious differences affected betabeleros’ status in Cache Valley communities. Mormons asserted that the LDS church represented the only true church.60 Indeed, they believed that their membership in

58 Meza, interview by author.
59 García, interview by author; also see Holguín, interview by author.
60 Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 136.
the organization revealed them as God’s favored people. This doctrine had a weighty effect on the status of Catholics in Mormon communities. Official church doctrine identified all people as children of God and urged respect for religious differences. In spite of this instruction, many Mormons felt superior to non-believers, and “often failed to extend the full hand of fellowship, love, and respect to neighbors who [were] not of their faith.”

Racism also proved a problem in LDS communities. Mormons believed that dark skin signified a punishment from God visited on the sinners of a bygone era. They believed that the dark-skinned individuals they came into contact with descended from people chastised by a Supreme Being. The widespread acceptance of this belief in Cache Valley created and sustained an environment where racism flourished. Epifiano González specifically mentioned his skin color as he discussed barriers to his acceptance into northern Utah society. Although Anglo Evan Hall played with migrants as a child “in the innocence of youth,” he quickly learned that Hispanics were not considered acceptable company in the society he lived in.

Religious differences between the two groups hampered Hispanic Catholics in another way by isolating them socially from the Anglo majority. Because they did not

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64 Hall, interview by author.
interact in the same religious spheres, Anglo Mormons were less likely to think of Hispanics Catholics as potential friends and colleagues. Research showed that Hispanics who abandoned Catholicism in favor of Utah’s dominant faith successfully connected into an important network. Betabeleros who joined the LDS church found themselves in religious fellowship with the majority population. Activities associated with the Mormon church gave Hispanic Mormons suitable occasions to connect with Anglo community members, earning them more social and occupational opportunities than their non-Mormon counterparts.

The experience of Benito García offered an interesting example of the potential implications of conversion to the LDS faith. After several years of migrating in and out of Cache Valley, Benito joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He found full-time employment with the Amalgamated Sugar Company that enabled his family to live in Cache Valley year-round. Benito shortened his name to the more Anglicized “Benny,” married a Mormon Anglo woman, and enjoyed a series of job promotions within the sugar company.

An area farmer who remembered Benito as a child recalled the transformation in community opinion toward the former migrant. He believed that Benny’s church membership “probably made a lot of difference to a lot of people.” Benny’s affiliation with the LDS church may have legitimized his position in Cache Valley society, while providing him with opportunities to build friendships with the region’s Mormon Anglos.

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66 Hall, interview by author.
The associations Benito made through religious contacts certainly facilitated the growth of more personal relationship with the majority population than many of his fellow betabeleros experienced.

Significantly, Mexicans and Chicanos who converted to the LDS faith suffered alienation from Hispanic Catholics. Mormons did not condone the recreational use of alcohol or tobacco, and they frowned on other behaviors accepted among many non-Mormons. Samuel Victor Miera explained the impact of LDS dogma on Hispanic converts:

For example, you take a Mexican family, and they’re used to all the things that they’ve been doing all of their life. To them, when you get together the first thing that you do is take out a beer...and you sit down and you smoke and drink beer. But now a person becomes a member of the Church [of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]. Now you don’t laugh when they tell a shady story, and you hear words said that you don’t like said in your house anymore. All of a sudden, you realize you’re not getting invitations any more to go out some Saturday evening with them... all of a sudden [that] comes to an end, and you’re an island.

Benito García spoke of similar strains on family relations when he discussed his own conversion to Mormonism. Clearly, while Hispanic converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints benefitted from their new consanguinity to the Mormon Anglo populace, their religious metamorphosis came at a price. Religion delineated Cache Valley communities in important ways, and doctrinal and social differences obstructed intimate


68 García, interview by author.
connections between groups.

Although a certain level of co-dependency existed in the relationship between laborers and the farming communities they worked in, the position of Anglo farm owners was far superior to that of Hispanic field laborers. Indeed, the groups belonged to two different economic and social classes. Few Anglo farmers in Cache Valley earned large incomes, but many enjoyed the prestige of land ownership and the dignity that came from following a profession long respected in the United States. Additionally, farm owners composed a large proportion of Cache Valley's population, which guaranteed them political power and influence in the valley's social institutions.

The position of sugar beet laborers stood in stark contrast to that of the farmers. While farmers could sell crops produced on their land, field laborers had nothing to sell except their own work. With this in mind, they migrated across the United States, peddling their skills. Their migratory lifestyle, their language, and their religion kept them isolated from the Anglo majority by deterring access to formal education, political power and community institutions.

The betabeleros' political weakness acted as both a symptom and an indicator of their low status in Cache Valley. In many cases, Hispanic workers lacked the tools that might have helped them to exercise power in Anglo society. For the most part, Cache Valley's sugar beet laborers remained uneducated and lacked fluency in the English language. They also possessed little free time in which they might have learned about

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political methods of redressing grievances. Frequent moves forced the laborers to form fluid, constantly changing communities that made organizing a politically savvy migrant populace a near impossibility.

In contrast, Cache Valley farmers consistently demonstrated their own political muscle. Sugar beet farmers banded together into growers’ associations that tried to bring sugar issues to the political forefront. In 1960, Cache Valley beet farmers used their political knowledge to resist the sale of a local sugar factory. The Franklin County Beet Growers’ Association went so far as to petition the Federal Fair Trade Commission in protest of the deal. Farmers also enlisted the aid of other community members. The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce, the county commissioner, the “Preston School,” and the farm bureau all wrote letters to the FTC on behalf of the growers.° Clearly, Cache Valley’s farmers knew what the government could do for them. They had political influence in their own communities and in the national government that proved far greater than that of migrants.

In every facet of their lives, Hispanic laborers encountered circumstances that proved far inferior to the situations of their Anglo peers. These experiences affected the migrants in devastating ways. One Cache Valley betabelero repeatedly referred to herself as a “dummy.” She explained that people like herself remained trapped in miserable jobs because they lacked “enough brains to do something else.” The woman had lived as an

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° Franklin County Beet Growers’ Association, minutes of meetings held May 23, 1960, June 7, 1960, and June 6, 1960 and August 23, 1960, Utah State University, Merrill Library Special Collections, box 1, folder 6.

Holguin, interview by author.
“inferior” in so many ways and for so many years that negative stereotypes affected her self-concept.

Even though Hispanic migrants lived on the periphery of Cache Valley’s larger community, the two men interviewed for this study asserted that they had never been victims of discrimination. Other evidence disputed those claims. A personal friend of Ernesto Garza’s reported that Ernesto borrowed money from a private community member when he needed funds to start a business. Reportedly, Ernesto feared that the bank would not lend money to him because of his ethnicity.72

Evan Hall, a Lewiston farmer, recalled a general atmosphere of discrimination against Hispanics in Lewiston. Amalgamated Sugar Company rented a house near the Hall home to sugar beet workers, and as a child Evan played with the migrants that occupied the house seasonally. Hall reported that his Anglo friends disapproved of his friendly attitude toward the Hispanics. He said:

I used to ride a pony a lot in the days when everybody had a pony and I would stop and talk to those people. And then you’d have people say, ‘Why are you stopping and talking to them?’, you know. And so that was in the middle fifties I’m sure. And people weren’t very tolerant. They used to walk a lot of places and people wouldn’t give them rides...

Hall also noted his own feeling of relief when local betabeleros dropped out of school. He recalled, “I never did feel a real sense of loss when they stopped coming. Because it was just something that I wasn’t going to have to deal with anymore. Talking to them and then having to explain to friends why I did it.” In one account, Hall explained that as a

young man he tried to recruit Benito García to play on Lewiston’s softball team. He named Benito specifically as a victim of local bigotry when he described his Anglo friends’ “disgust” at his attempt.73

Presumably, both Ernesto Garza and Benito García endured discrimination in spite of their statements to the contrary. Possibly the men were unaware of the intolerance around them, or simply forgot unpleasant instances. However, it seemed more likely that the memories remained too painful to recount. The men may have felt uncomfortable presenting themselves as “victims” because of audience considerations. In their interviews, the men spoke directly with a young, Anglo female. Perhaps even thirty years after the fact, these informants did not feel comfortable discussing their vulnerabilities. The phenomenon of romanticizing the past speaks to the harmful, long-term effects of the discrimination Cache Valley’s migrants faced.

Like their counterparts in various regions of the country, Cache Valley’s betaboleros knew harsh working and living conditions. The labor they performed proved physically and emotionally demanding. The work also took a toll on children, as families’ migratory lifestyles kept juveniles in the fields and out of schools. Further, laborers dealt with poor housing conditions and limited opportunities for relaxing and socializing.

Cache Valley’s Hispanic sugar beet workers endured isolation from the larger community in many ways. Their poverty, their skin color, their language and lack of formal education all identified them as strangers; as people who did not belong as legitimate residents in the region. Hispanics’ traditional religion further distinguished them.

73 Hall, interview by author.
as outsiders, and their political impotence left them powerless to seek reforms. In all aspects of their lives, they existed on the periphery of the larger societies that they migrated through. In Cache Valley, Hispanic migrants were subordinate to the white, Mormon population. This inequity of status made it hard for them to break out of low-paying, low-prestige jobs. As the region’s sugar beet industry expired, betaboleros’ former status had long-range implications for their self images and larger world view as they continued to negotiated tenuous but essential relationships with predominantly Anglo communities.

Despite the magnitude of migrants’ contribution to Cache Valley’s agricultural economy, accounts depicting laborers experiences in the region remained shrouded. This investigation attempts to bring attention to the Hispanic history of a predominantly Anglo region, fostering a more complete understanding of community and local history.
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**LETTERS**


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