

BARGAINING FOR BEETS | MIGRANTS AND GROWERS IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY

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Americans have a sweet tooth; they consume 158 pounds of caloric sweeteners, mostly sucrose, each year. Sucrose comes primarily from sugar cane, a tall tropical grass, and from sugar beets, a temperate-zone root crop. Historically, sugar production required back-breaking, exhausting fieldwork.¹

Sugar beets were once one of the Midwest's most labor-intensive crops. Each year thousands of seasonal workers toiled for low wages to meet the growing

demand for sugar. After World War I most northern beet-growing areas relied on workers from Mexico. Mechanization was removing many permanent workers from fields but increasing the need for seasonal hires. Meanwhile, rising factory wages were luring European immigrants out of the beet fields.²

For many Mexicans, sugar beets represented their best economic hope. Mexico still suffered from the devastation of the 1910 revolution, and although pay for beet work



was low, labor contracts allowed entire families to work together. This resulted in an acceptable, if very low, aggregate family income. In turn, growers welcomed the control they gained by employing families, which were less mobile than single workers. By the end of the 1920s, *betabeleros* (Mexican and Mexican American sugar-beet workers) made up 90 percent of the Midwest's field laborers in some areas. Over the next decades the power balance between beet producers and as many as 26,000 migrant workers who traveled to the Red River Valley fluctuated with national events and advances in beet-growing technology. Dependent upon each other in a sometimes paternal relationship, neither workers, farmers, nor the American Crystal Sugar Company permanently held all the advantages.

Straddling the Minnesota-North Dakota border, the Red River Valley was formed when Glacial Lake Agassiz deposited a 20-to-30-foot silt bed from what is now the Canadian border to the North Dakota-South Dakota state line. Tapering from 80 miles wide in the north to 20 miles wide in the south, the Valley is bisected by the north-flowing Red River. Few trees exist except along the river or where they have been planted as shel-

terbelts around farms. To the human eye, the landscape appears virtually level and uninterrupted.

Sugar-beet production in the Valley began shortly after World War I. The University of Minnesota's Northwest Agricultural Experiment Station in Polk County had conducted field tests with beets during the war. The results attracted interest from the Minnesota Sugar Company (formerly the Carver County Sugar Company), which had operated a sugar-beet processing plant at Chaska since 1910. After contracting with some Valley farmers to grow beets, Minnesota Sugar announced plans in 1924 to construct a processing plant in East Grand Forks. At this time the Denver-based American Beet Sugar Company bought Minnesota Sugar and its interests in the Valley, as well as several other midwestern companies. Construction continued, and the processing plant became operational for the 1926 harvest. About 42,000 tons of sugar beets from 4,600 acres were

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Migrant workers topping beets in G. W. Johnson's Renville County field near Hector, late 1920s



A Short History of Sugar

Sugar, in the form of sucrose, is found in all green plants. Although it is not essential to life, no civilization has been known to disavow the taste of sweetness.

Sugar cane, a member of the grass family, was first cultivated about 8,000 B.C. in New Guinea. One variety made its way to India by 400 B.C. and then to the Arab world. Arabs introduced sugar to the privileged classes in Europe in the eighth century A.D.

Sugar only became widely accessible in Europe after Columbus brought cane to the New World. By the end of the seventeenth century, Brazil and the Caribbean region had become centers of production. England's per capita ingestion of sugar rose dramatically from four pounds in 1700 to 90 pounds in 1900.

In the United States, sugar cane was grown in Louisiana and Florida, and citizens consumed less than 40 pounds per year in 1880. After U.S. corporations expanded into Hawaii and Cuba and the United States acquired Puerto Rico and the Philippines in the



Migrant worker using short-handled hoe

Spanish-American War, Americans doubled their consumption.

Sugar beets, the other primary source of sucrose, had long been grown in Europe to feed livestock. In the 1700s German chemists learned to extract high-quality sugar from certain varieties of beets, an important discovery for countries lacking tropical colonies. The first sugar-beet

extraction factory began operating in Prussia in 1802, and Napoleon Bonaparte encouraged French production.

German immigrants brought sugar beets to the United States in the early nineteenth century, but serious production began only after 1870, primarily in California, Colorado, and Nebraska. It expanded just before World War I into other midwestern states. Today, sugar beets are grown in 16 states between the Great Lakes and the Pacific Ocean.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural Minnesotans also sweetened their food with molasses made from sorghum cane. Most neighborhoods had at least one farmer with a mill who crushed the stalks and boiled the juice down into sweet syrup.

Sources: R. H. Cottrell, ed., *Beet-Sugar Economics* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1952); Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Shop-
taugh, *Roots of Success*; D. Jerome Tweton, "The Business of Agriculture," in *Minnesota in a Century of Change*, ed. Clifford E. Clark Jr. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), 287–89.

processed that first year. By 1929, production had more than doubled to almost 94,000 tons produced on more than 15,000 acres.³

The Valley's climate represented a special challenge for sugar-beet production. In areas such as California, growers could stagger plantings and keep workers occupied for seven months of the year. Red River Valley growers tried this but found yields unsatisfactory; by 1930, they limited themselves to a single planting. Therefore, Valley fieldwork requirements were high in May and June, when workers "blocked," thinned, and weeded the fields, most often on their knees with short-handled hoes. Little additional labor was necessary until late September when they pulled, topped, and piled the beets. Insuring a ready supply of

workers for these two brief periods each year presented an immense challenge for growers.⁴

While most beet-growing regions in the 1920s overwhelmingly employed Mexican laborers, the Red River Valley did not. Sugar beets did not become the dominant regional commodity overnight, and most farmers still grew other crops. Furthermore, Valley growers could do beet fieldwork without seasonal help if their operation was 20 acres or less, and during the late 1920s the average beet contract ranged from about 16 acres to 28 acres. For example, John Fiandaca, whose family worked a small, 12-acre farm near Dilworth, recalled that he and his brothers did all their own fieldwork. American Beet Sugar Company experimented with "gangs" of local boys and girls, more than 700 in 1930, for example. In addition,

for several years the company transported German Russians from its operations in Nebraska to help out in the Valley. Some years, Filipinos were brought by train from the West Coast, but the growers found many “had a tendency to drift.” A 1931 American Beet Sugar Company document described the Valley’s sugar-beet work force as 60 percent “local white,” 35 percent Mexican, and 5 percent “drift-in whites.”⁵

The onset of the Great Depression hurt sugar-beet production in the Valley. The rate paid to growers dropped from about \$7.00 per ton in 1930 to about \$5.15 per ton in 1932; total acreage fell 10 percent. But producers then became recipients of New Deal benefits. In 1934 the Jones-Costigan Act (an amendment to the Agricultural Adjustment Act) provided government-subsidized support payments to growers, and the Sugar Act of 1937 virtually institutionalized federal aid. Factoring in government support, farmers in the Valley through 1940 averaged about \$6.80 per ton, very close to the 1930 record harvest. By 1940 more than 26,000 acres produced more than 236,000 tons of sugar, about twice the amount produced a decade earlier.⁶

Political events in the 1930s also brought changes to America’s labor pool. A nationwide movement to repatriate Mexican immigrants (and Mexican Americans) returned perhaps one million people to Mexico, and in the Valley pressures emerged to employ resident whites only. J. B. Bingham, manager of American Beet Sugar’s East

Growers often worked their own beets on family plots less than 20 acres in size.



Window display featuring East Grand Forks processing plant’s first bag of sugar and small souvenir bags handed out at 1926 opening celebration and dance

Grand Forks district, reported that he intended to use mostly local white laborers in 1933; that year, whites did fully 80 percent of the work. Numbers of migrant laborers began to rebound significantly in 1935, however, and by 1940 almost three-fourths of Valley sugar-beet laborers were Mexican American. The Jones-Costigan and Sugar Acts also standardized sugar-beet wages; while still low, wages rose more than 10 percent between 1936 and 1938.⁷

In the later 1930s, as Valley whites secured better employment or entered New Deal programs, growers turned anew to migrant workers, and Mexican Americans replaced repatriated Mexicans. Each spring American Crystal Sugar (American Beet Sugar’s new name beginning in 1934) authorized private employment agencies throughout the Midwest to sign up workers from the *barrios* (neighborhoods) or *colonias* (settlements) in and around St. Paul, Kansas City, and other cities with Mexican American populations. Sometimes *enganchistas* (Mexican American recruiters) were hired to provide laborers, and, increasingly, the most likely place to find seasonal workers became south Texas. Farming had replaced the area’s livestock industry by the end of the 1920s, and Mexican American *rancheros* (small ranchers) did not fare well in the transition. The number owning land declined dramatically, and mechanization reduced the need for permanent farm hands. In San Antonio,

Sugar from Sugar Beets

Sugar beets are triangular-shaped root plants nearly a foot in length and six inches in diameter at the crown. A mature beet weighs between two and five pounds.

At a processing factory, beets are cleaned and sliced by machine into thin strips. When soaked in tanks of hot water, the strips give up sugar in liquid form. After refining, the liquid sugar is boiled until crystallized sugar grains emerge. About 95 percent of sugar-beet sugar is sold to food and drink manufacturers.

Sources: Cottrell, *Beet-Sugar Economics*; Shoptaugh, *Roots of Success*

where 12,000 once toiled in the pecan-shelling industry, only 1,800 were needed after mechanization. Texas coal reserves, too, were rapidly running out, and many Mexican American miners found themselves laid off. Considering the widespread racism and legal Jim Crowism in some Texas communities, Mexican Americans had strong incentives to become Red River Valley *betabeleros*.⁸

Throughout most of the depression, a labor surplus gave American Crystal and the growers the advantage in their dealings with migrants. Between 1931 and 1935, the company's East Grand Forks district records show an annual surplus of labor. In 1932, for example, there was "an over supply of labor all season." This meant the company and growers had little incentive to provide migrant workers with benefits or amenities that would ensure their return the next year. Migrant housing was very poor quality, often consisting of converted farm buildings without indoor privies. Water had to be drawn from wells and nearby streams. One migrant later remembered "a one-room house. . . . The running water was outside, the bathroom was outside of the house. Everything was outside." Not until the harvest of 1935 was there any shortage of workers in the area, a situation that made the harvest difficult for years to come.⁹

It was this shortage, plus changes in migrant transportation, that provided Mexican American workers slightly more clout in dealings with employers. Field labor was only essential to beet growing in the Valley during early summer and two months later at harvest time. In the 1920s Mexican migrants had been brought

north by train at the company's expense. While costly, this gave producers considerable control over the stranded workers, who could be moved to other beet areas, if needed, or subcontracted out to canneries. In the 1930s Mexican Americans began driving north in private automobiles and trucks. This gave them greater freedom in their personal lives and flexibility in employment. For example, Jesus Sanchez remembered that his father would drive to the Valley in the spring for beet work, move on to Wisconsin cucumber fields, and then return to the Valley for the beet harvest. Better able to contract themselves out to other regional employers (especially potato growers and canneries) and to arrange work such as cherry picking in other parts of the Midwest, migrants developed their own labor circuits and contacts. They could stay to work the Valley's beet harvest if they chose to, or not.¹⁰

In 1941 this slight advantage significantly influenced the harvest. When the growing season started poorly because of heavy May rainfall, planting was delayed, leaving many migrants little to do. Labor was plentiful at first, but, according to a manager's report, rain "turned [fields] into bogs. . . . difficult for equipment and labor," and beet fieldwork stretched into late July; many Mexican Americans departed for other seasonal jobs. On October 29, in the midst of the harvest, a blizzard struck the Valley. One fieldman, watching the remaining migrants work in frozen, snow-covered mud, wondered how they "could stand it." When many fled to warmer climes, the remaining laborers then demanded a 20-cents-per-ton increase in harvest wages. The growers quickly agreed to pay rather than face ruin.¹¹

World War II's labor shortages fostered further modest bargaining advantages for Mexican American migrants, who accounted for three-fourths of the Valley's 20,000 sugar-beet workers by 1941. The war interrupted the foreign sugar trade, driving production in the Valley to its highest level. By 1945 more than 36,000 acres produced more than 368,000 tons of sugar, a gain of about 60 percent over prewar levels.¹²

The first year of the war was especially chaotic. The local labor pool evaporated as residents entered the military or found employment in war-industry work. Native Americans were trucked in from nearby reservations, but, as one fieldman reported, "They were going as fast as they were coming." Desperate producers hired university students, but, according to a company report, "Bad weather caused these workers to become discouraged."

When Mexican American workers arriving in the Valley asserted their right to bring their own vehicles, growers who had previously resisted gave in. M. F. Williams, an American Crystal fieldman, reported that migrants now refused to work “dawn to dusk. . . [and] quit work on Saturday noon and would not report back to the field until Monday.” Most migrants worked only eight-hour days. Another fieldman, Halvor A. Tvedten, predicted, “There is no doubt that some of my growers will have to provide better living quarters for their labor next year.” He noted that Mexican Americans were refusing to work if their housing was seriously unsatisfactory. This made planning and harvesting more difficult.¹³

Labor shortages, which extended beyond the confines

of the Valley, encouraged the United States and Mexico to reach a labor agreement in August 1942. Called the Bracero Program, it established procedures for bringing Mexicans into the United States as temporary workers. Although the total number of braceros is much disputed by historians, Mexican workers were undoubtedly important to the nation’s wartime agricultural production. Their significance in Valley beet fields, however, is less clear because virtually no American Crystal labor records for those years exist. Evidence suggests that braceros made up less than 10 percent of the work force. Valley growers also employed black migrant workers, Jamaican contract workers, and German POWs, but most apparently relied mainly on Mexican Americans and local whites.¹⁴

Newly married Mexican beet workers in migrant housing, photographed near Crookston in 1937 by Russell Lee



Concerned about recruiting sufficient workers, American Crystal opened the American Crystal Labor Agency in Texas in 1943. Other companies such as Great Western and Michigan Sugar already had labor agencies there, but American Crystal had previously used only private agencies and *enganchistas*. In 1943, Eduardo Aldrete headed American Crystal's agency; the following year M. C. "Sully" Sullivan took the job, which he held for the next two decades.¹⁵

Setting up a recruitment agency proved complex and expensive. Meetings had to be arranged with state and federal agencies, such as the United States Employment Service, the War Manpower Commission, and the Office of Price Administration. This often resulted in contradictory decisions that first year. Texas labor licenses had to

be purchased and performance bonds deposited in each county in which the company intended to recruit. Furthermore, Texas allowed each county to establish dates during which workers could be contracted, and Texas law forbade recruiting anyone already employed. Texas was especially nervous about its labor force because the Mexican government refused to allow braceros to work in Texas, which had a history of discrimination against Latinos. Noting that some farmers harassed his recruiters, Aldrete hired eight men (seven Mexican Americans) that first year and paid them \$2–\$3 for each worker obtained. He wrote American Crystal that competition for workers was fierce. The company advertised daily for two months in a Spanish-language Texas newspaper, *La Prensa*, and distributed Spanish-language handbills in numerous

Machines such as this Rassman beet lifter and buncher, tried in the Valley in the 1930s, offered hope of reducing the number of hired workers.





Migrants doing labor-intensive, back-breaking work on young beet plants, early 1930s

communities. Several fieldmen from the Valley were brought to Texas to coordinate recruiting with specific growers' needs, and American Crystal rented office space in seven Texas cities.¹⁶

Most migrants arrived in the Valley in 1943 in private vehicles; only about 50 came by rail. Workers who planned to drive received gas-ration coupons and tire permits from the Department of Transportation. The labor agency advanced money for tires and auto repairs. Moreover, it disbursed travel allowances of \$15 to each worker departing from north of San Antonio and \$17 for each worker from south of that city. The agency tried holding this to \$7 paid in Texas, with the remainder paid upon arrival in the Valley, but other companies paid the full amount, and American Crystal had to conform to be competitive. In all, American Crystal Labor Agency recruited 3,291 Mexican Americans in Texas that first year, sending 1,919 to the Red River Valley. It recruited a similar number in 1944, but only 2,339 in 1945.¹⁷

Without the emergence of a paternalistic relationship between growers and workers, the shortage of fieldworkers might have been worse. *Patronismo*, an Iberian cultural phenomenon, existed in Mexico and south Texas well into the twentieth century. As historian David Montejano has demonstrated, along the Texas-Mexican border landowners (*patróns*) and their *gente* (people) created a system in which the *patróns* secured a stable work force by forging social and cultural ties with their workers. The work was arduous, the conditions difficult, and the pay poor, but laborers were kept relatively compliant by employer benevolence. The *patrón* might serve as a godfather, pay for medical services, supplement a dowry, or give other favors to loyal workers. This system declined as agribusiness replaced ranching during the first half of the century, but many Mexican Americans were familiar with that relationship.¹⁸

Indeed, it appears that a quasi-*patronismo* system evolved in the Red River Valley in the late 1930s. Most

Mexican Americans came to the Valley in family units. One family with 3-to-4 workers over age 14 could complete the fieldwork for about 30 acres, about half of the average grower's acreage during this period. Thus, a typical grower usually hired only two families each summer, not too many people for a farm family to come to know well. Second, American Crystal encouraged growers to establish familiar relationships with workers they wanted to retain. As early as 1937 American Crystal's Red River Valley manager O. A. Holkesvig reported that many growers maintained contact with good workers through the winter months and that congratulatory letters accompanied final paychecks. Virtually every labor-agency report filed by recruiter Sullivan after 1945 stressed the importance of growers writing letters and sending Christmas cards to families they wanted back. Some growers sent Christmas gifts. Sullivan noted that these interactions had two results: workers who brought growers' letters to recruiters were obviously people the agency wanted to contract again, and Sullivan claimed many workers exhibited these letters to the recruiters with obvious pride. *Crystallized Facts*, American Crystal's publication for employees and growers, promoted *patronismo* by offering tips on keeping workers satisfied. If workers were without cars, growers should take them to town frequently. Make sure they have credit at local stores, but ensure they do not overspend. Provide housing in good condition that includes radios, irons, and other items. Help defray medical expenses if a child becomes ill. Many of these suggestions assumed an almost parental relationship between grower and *betabelero*.¹⁹

These quasi-*patronismo* methods seem to have been effective in building loyalty. Though the evidence is mainly circumstantial, it appears many Mexican American families and growers forged close ties, and workers remained with the same grower year after year. Juan Rodríguez remembered that his family first "came up" in 1941, and he worked with the same grower until he entered the military in 1948. After discharge, Rodríguez went back to that grower for several more years. Alvaro Zamora recalled his father first went to the beet fields in 1945. Through three decades his father worked for only four growers, one for 16 years. Elva Treviño's family was only in the Valley six years but always with the same grower. He loaned her family enough money to buy a car their first year if they promised to come back and work for him the next, and she recalled riding horses with the grower's daughter.

Stewart Bass, an American Crystal official and once a fieldman himself, summed up grower-migrant relations as generally congenial, although "blemished by a few" growers and workers: "The bulk of the labor and the grower got along well. There was a warm friendship between them and the labor did a good job." With these bonds established, growers could be somewhat assured of sufficient field labor each summer.²⁰

The shortage of laborers during the war years also meant that wages rose about 40 percent, and the work became a bit easier. The number of growers using machinery to cross-cultivate their crop increased, making weeding physically easier, and new, segmented seeds helped to eliminate the need for the infamous short-handled hoe from many fields because plant clumping was reduced. American Crystal's labor agency offered other inducements to attract workers: by 1945 it paid for transportation from Texas to the fields if the worker finished out his contract, gave a food allowance for each *betabelero* making the journey, and provided free liability insurance to each driver. To help defray the labor agency's expenses, growers in the Valley were assessed a \$1-per-acre fee by American Crystal. Growers could afford to pay, since these were good economic years for them, too. In 1944 and 1945, they received over \$12 per ton for sugar.²¹

War's end found the growers extremely nervous about the future of sugar-beet production, but between 1945 and the onset of the Korean War, sugar prices stayed high because New Deal price supports remained in place. Prices never dropped below \$12 per ton in the interwar period and achieved a new high in 1949 of \$14.25 per ton. Acreage harvested jumped to more than 56,000 that year, and more than 580,000 tons of sugar were processed in the Valley. Some 700 growers received yearly contracts from American Crystal, which in 1948 opened a second processing plant in Moorhead. The demand for fieldworkers remained high.²²

American Crystal considered eliminating its labor agency in Texas but learned it could not. Sullivan toured the Midwest in the winter of 1945-46 to assess the availability of labor, but he found signs of an incipient economic boom: construction projects underway, more vehicles on the road, and a scarcity of motel rooms. At the same time, labor agencies American Crystal had relied upon before the war in Kansas City and Oklahoma City had disappeared. Mexican Americans he conversed with

HERRAMIENTAS TOOLS

Sierra Wood saw	Serrucho Hand saw	Martillo Hammer	Hacha Axe	Llave Wrench	Desatornillador Screwdriver	Berbequín Brace
Barrena Bit	Alambre Wire	Soga, reata Rope				
Azadón Hoe	Azadón de mango corto Short handled hoe			Azadón de mango largo Long handled hoe		Lima File
Machete para tapear Topping knife		Cinta para medir Tape line		Arar To plow	Cultivar To cultivate	Sembrar To sow
Desahijar To block and thin		Limpiar To hoe	Quitar cuatas Pull doubles		Tapear To top	Sureo Row
Amontonar To pile	Bono Bonus	Alcanzar bono To get a bonus		Betabel Beet	Las hojas The leaves	La corona The crown
La raíz The root					El camote Beet	

EN EL CAMPO IN THE FIELD

Yo soy el revisador I am the fieldman	Tengo gusto en conocer a Vd. I am glad to meet you
Puede Vd. comenzar el desahije. You can begin blocking and thinning.	(La limpia) (El tapeo) (Hoing) (Topping)
Hágame el favor de dejar el debido número de plantas. Please leave a good stand.	
¿Cuándo principia el desahije? When does the blocking and thinning start?	Favor de comenzar el desahije el..... Please commence the blocking and thinning....
¿Cuándo principia la limpia? When does the hoeing start?	Favor de comenzar la limpia..... Please commence the hoeing.....
¿Cuándo principia a levantar betabel? When will the beets be lifted?	
Se levantará el betabel el..... cuando habrá que comenzar el tapeo. The beets will be lifted..... when the topping must start.	
Favor de trabajar los surcos hasta sus extremos. Please work the rows to the end.	
De otra manera, el ranero no puede cultivar. Otherwise, the farmer can not cultivate.	
Trabajando un poco más aprisa, se acabará el trabajo a tiempo, y se ganará más dinero. Working a little faster, you will finish the work on time and earn more money.	
Tenga cuidado de no maltratar la mata con el azadón.	

Bilingual booklet (detail) for growers and workers offering information on matters ranging from factory locations and hoeing beets to dealing with hard water, doctors, and tuberculosis

told him jobs were plentiful in urban areas. In Texas, Sullivan found Holly Sugar Company opening a labor agency, and rumors were flying that California Fruit would be recruiting, as well. Therefore, Sullivan reopened the labor-agency offices in San Antonio. He obtained licenses for 19 counties (up from 12 in 1945) and hired 14 recruiters (up from 9). Their pay was now as much as \$3.50 per worker. In addition, the agency discovered it had to keep improving travel benefits and offer other

cash advances. Where total advance payouts had averaged around \$20 per worker during the war, between 1946 and 1949 they jumped to more than \$30 per worker, and Valley growers were charged \$2.50 per acre to maintain the labor agency.²³

Postwar competition for workers remained intense. For one thing, the number of Mexican American workers needed from Texas grew each year. Some 3,441 were sent to the Valley in 1946, but by 1949 the number had risen

to 4,782. Local workers virtually shunned fieldwork after the war, and midwestern Mexican Americans were more likely to have found permanent jobs in cities. The United States and Mexico renewed the Bracero Program in 1947, but braceros only came in great numbers to the Valley after that to augment the work force for the harvest. Hence, Mexican American migrant workers remained indispensable, and sugar companies, canneries, and other field-crop processors vied for their services.²⁴

While Mexican Americans were still willing to work during the late spring and early summer, they were less enthusiastic about the harvest. Having their children back in school by September had become a primary concern. The Valley was also remote from the migrants' other work locales. As agricultural mechanization increased, workers often had to range farther for seasonal jobs. If migrants were working cucumbers in the Great Lakes states or harvesting cotton in the Southwest, it was impossible for them to be in the Valley in September. As a

result, American Crystal urged growers to find nearby work for migrants during the late summer months and subcontracted them to Minnesota canneries. Nonetheless, Valley growers faced harvest shortages, and in 1951 and 1952 braceros had to be flown in at considerable expense to harvest the beet crop.²⁵

Confronted with Mexican American workers gaining some modest advantages and the ongoing difficulty of securing workers at harvest time, Valley beet producers turned increasingly to machines. Mechanization had grown steadily during the war, the most important development being the use of cultivators to cross-cultivate or "block" the beets. By machine weeding in perpendicular rows, growers could reduce the amount of necessary hand hoeing from two or three passes to often a single hoeing. This reduced the need for field labor and cut costs. American Crystal's inconsistent statistics suggest that growers cross-cultivated about 60 percent of their fields at the end of World War II, and by 1950, 80 percent. In addi-

Migrant housing, East Grand Forks, with family car used for moving around the country and back to Texas, about 1950



tion, new beet drills or planters and thinners were introduced, and segmented seeds and chemical herbicides were widely utilized. *Crystal-ized Facts*, which first appeared in 1947, devoted considerable attention to reducing labor requirements through mechanization, a focus that succeeded. Where some 26,000 fieldworkers were once required, less than 15,000 toiled by 1954.²⁶

Growers achieved their greatest advantage by reducing the need for labor at the end of the season. The 1950 harvest was especially difficult, with barely two-thirds of the required hands available. In the face of deteriorating weather conditions, migrants were only persuaded to stay through “special inducements.” Mechanical harvesters brought in only 47 percent of the crop that year. American Crystal manager Holkesvig thought these labor problems would persuade growers to obtain harvesters more quickly. *Crystal-ized Facts* articles promoted the benefits of mechanical harvesters, while Valley banks supplied attractive equipment-loan rates, and the desired results were rapidly attained. By the following year more than three-fourths of the beet acres were harvested by machines, and in 1952 that number jumped to 96 percent. By the time the Korean War ended, growers no longer needed autumn field laborers.²⁷

The need to secure early-summer field laborers remained a problem through the Korean War, though. Mechanization reduced the need for workers, but sugar-beet acreage in the Valley increased 40 percent between 1950 and 1954. Thus, increased production offset some of the gains made by more efficient cultivation. In Texas, Mexican Americans found other employment opportunities as more jobs in industry and service became available. The number classified as farm laborers dropped from more than one-third in 1930 to less than one-fourth in 1950. In each year of the Korean War, American Crystal’s labor agency failed to provide Valley growers all the Texas workers they needed. Despite the facts that it was paying the highest-ever advances to migrants, that field wages had increased 20 percent, and that the agency hired more recruiters, the labor agency had to contract for a few braceros every year at the last moment. During 1951 and 1952 some were flown in from El Paso during the early summer at a cost of 10 percent more per worker than Texas migrants.²⁸

From the 1920s through mid-1950s, the producer-migrant relationship in the Red River Valley remained in a state of flux. Neither side permanently held all the advantages. Growers had an ample labor pool through the early years of the Great Depression, but from the mid-1930s until the adoption of the mechanical harvester in the 1950s, migrants often obtained significant leverage. Even as fieldwork became more mechanized, American Crystal and its growers recognized the need to maintain a capable and sufficient labor force. Migrant workers exploited that situation where they could. The resulting system was one with some characteristics of preindustrial *patronismo* in an era increasingly shaped by modern agribusiness dynamics.

Important changes in the grower-migrant relationship, however, occurred in the decades after 1954. First, the amount of sugar beets produced continued to rise while the number of migrant workers steadily declined. Greater mechanization, increased use of chemical herbicides and pesticides, an ever-expanding market, and federal-government support all contributed to higher levels of production. By the mid-1980s, the annual number of Valley *betabeleros* had dropped to less than 10,000, while by the 1990s, more than 400,000 acres of beets were being cultivated in the Valley. *Betabeleros* worked for a shorter duration in early summer, and very few were needed during the harvest. Second, in 1973 the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers Association bought American Crystal’s operation in the Valley. The next year the American Crystal Labor Agency ceased operation. From then on, growers and migrants contracted with each other directly, not through the agency. Finally, the 1970s and 1980s were often tense years between growers and migrants, as growers came under significant scrutiny from federal and state officials concerned about pay and treatment of workers. Many growers stopped providing housing rather than conform to government-imposed standards. By this time, however, the Mexican American community had grown in the Valley. Fargo-Moorhead, Grand Forks-East Grand Forks, and Crookston each had significant permanent populations of Mexican American residents. These Latino communities represent one of the most enduring legacies of the dynamic relationship between migrants and growers in the changing Red River Valley sugar-beet economy.²⁹ □

The wise have mechanized...



Pledged to Progress for Our Growers
Since 1899
American Crystal Sugar Company

In 1961 Crystal-ized Facts openly urged mechanization to avoid trouble with workers who might follow the example set by picketing California farm laborers.

Notes

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The photos on p. 196-97, 198, 199 (top and bottom), 202, 203, and 208 (from the *American Crystal Sugar Company Records*, series 36) and the booklet excerpt on p. 205 (El Cultivo Del Betabel: Manual Para Los Trabajadores [*American Beet Sugar Company*, 1929]) are in the Minnesota Historical Society collections, St. Paul. The photo on p. 201 is courtesy the Library of Congress.



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